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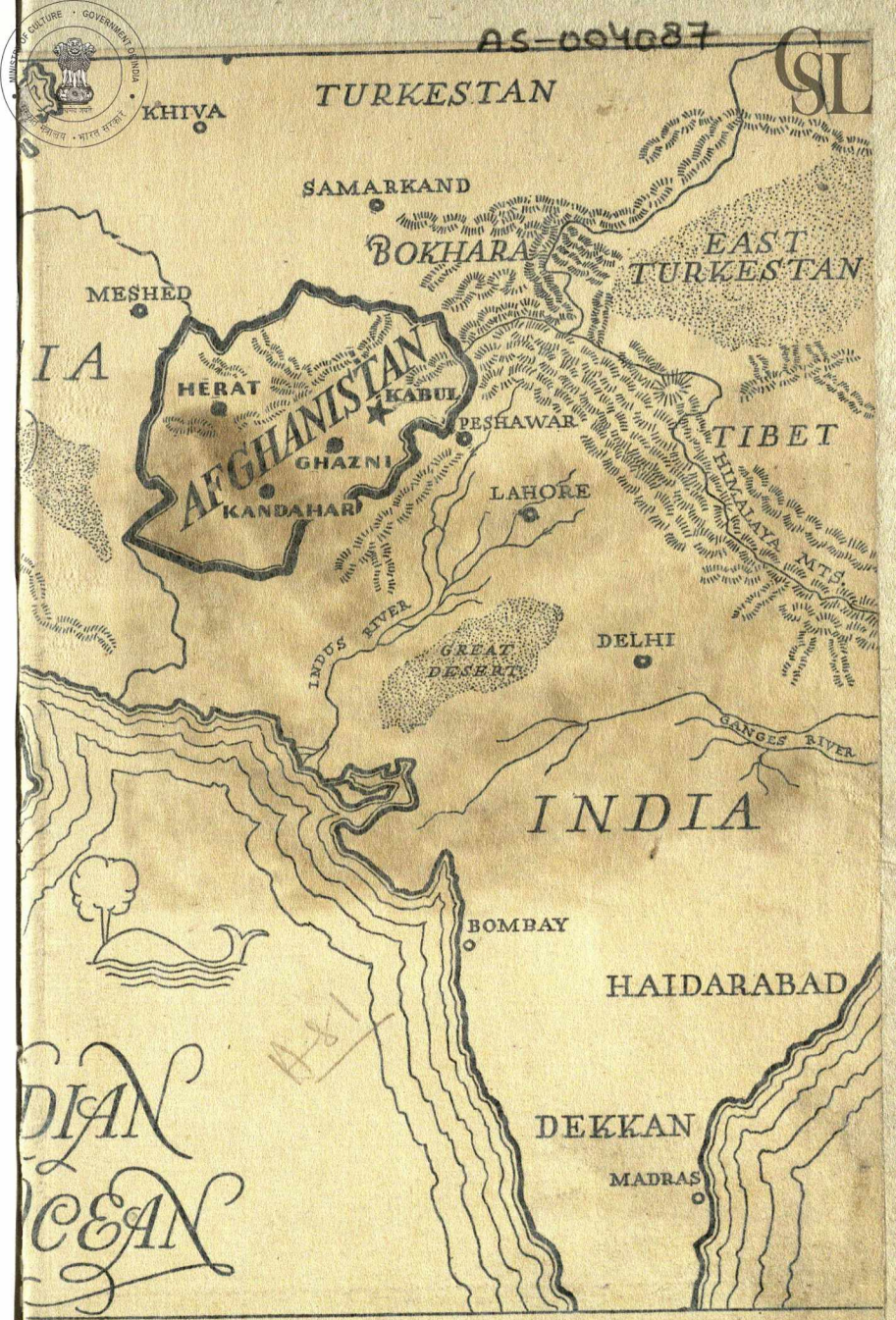
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AFGHAN JOURNEY

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FOR CONSULTATION ONLY

AFGHAN JOURNEY

by

BEN JAMES

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

MINISTRY OF CULTURE · GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
संस्कृति मंत्रालय · भारत सरकार

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FIRST PUBLISHED 1935

JONATHAN CAPE LTD. 30 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON
AND 91 WELLINGTON STREET WEST, TORONTO

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE CITY OF OXFORD
AT THE ALDEN PRESS
PAPER MADE BY JOHN DICKINSON & CO., LTD.
BOUND BY A. W. BAIN & CO. LTD.

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To Ethel

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PART ONE

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CHAPTER I

I SHOULD like to claim fantastic origins for the impulses that have sent me off to distant lands, then I could answer with romantic embellishments that question, 'How did you come to undertake such a journey?'

But I can allege no quick-born fever for adventure, no suddenly fired curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of remote peoples. I have never felt the drive of frustrated love urging me away to forget. I have not been inclined to hold in contempt the healthy, raw buoyancy of America, my native land, and seek solace in softer tongues, more lethargic climes. No bugles blew nor drums rolled to put me on my way.

I had been back in the United States somewhat longer than a year and was deciding to abandon my peripatetic habits. I was considering this decision as I rode toward the Middle West on a short holiday from a New York law office. My last vacation had been fourteen months of wandering around the world. Two weeks in the country would be quite as good, I argued, bolstering up my domestic resolutions.

A professor of psychology rode with me. We sat in the smoking compartment of a pullman train speeding over familiar prairies of the Middle West. The good professor had a round bland face, and a good deal of the well-fed benignity of an ecclesiastic who stands in the good graces of his congregation, his bishop and his God. There was the soft sureness in his voice that men

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acquire who earnestly believe themselves delegates of an occult power.

This psychologist represented the cult of Doctor Freud in the diocese, though an Adlerian heresy coloured his doctrines.

'You should,' he said to me in an easy chant, 'examine yourself and understand the forces behind your restless wanderings.'

He pictured malignant inhibitions, desires imprisoned deep in the subconscious mind, nameless demonic urges that worked in the dark without articulate expression. Suppressed ego and sex. They were the devils to be scotched if one would stay at home in the calm of security.

I arrived in the Iowa town for my holiday determined to drive into the light of consciousness the evil spirit of the subconscious that had chased me over so many countries.

It was in this frame of mind on a Sunday afternoon — my thirty-second birthday — that I stretched out in a wicker chair on a quiet Iowa lawn. In two weeks I would be back in the office. I was making the most of the holiday. The leaves of an ancient elm rustled above me in a mild breeze that carried the smell of earth and growing crops.

I picked up what seemed to be a quite harmless book. It was Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*. As I read, the drowsy silence of the hot afternoon bore the purr of automobiles from a distant highway at the edge of the town, along a wide road of gravel that cut golden, geometric lines through fields of rustling corn. It was

the familiar, peaceable way to Rockwell City and to Omaha.

I began reading of another road — a trail followed by an oriental prince and princess moving from the lacy vales of Kashmir through India's north-west frontier and across Afghanistan to meet:

> Wild warriors of the turquoise hill — and those
> Who dwell beyond the everlasting snows
> Of Hindu Kosh, in stormy freedom bred,
> Their fort the rock, their camp the torrent's bed.

Then, unannounced, like returning fever, came a demoralizing notion. These placid Iowa highways, amongst which I sat could, with a little juggling, be made to lead to that forbidden kingdom barricaded on the roof of the world between Russia and India.

The good advice of the psychologist vanished in a romantic fantasy.

I turned to the day's newspapers, which carried meagre dispatches of tumultuous goings-on in Afghanistan. Turbanned warriors, whose ancestors had fought Jenghis Khan, Baber and Alexander, were marching through stark, golden mountains on to their capital, Kabul.

The grim, grey, formidable city, high in the mountains, shadowed by higher peaks, was being plundered by the usurper-king, Bacha Saquo — bandit son of a water carrier, who wore a talisman on his burly right arm that caused bullets to pass harmlessly through him, so he believed, as though he were a ghost. King Amanullah, by plane and Rolls-Royce, had fled,

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leaving in smouldering embers his dreams of modernizing the nation.

A tubercular general, Nadir Khan, was leading his flaming-eyed Mohammedan fighters toward the city gates to make himself king. British India was peering down from Khyber Pass, and Red Russia glaring over the northern border from Turkestan, anxiously watching the mysterious, independent buffer state in revolt. Bloody, forbidden Afghanistan was proving its right to its sinister reputation.

Events in the isolated nation were rapidly smothering resolutions I had made to rationalize my interests in strange places.

Because few foreigners were admitted to the stormy kingdom, there were few details of the country's strange life. I brought out Kipling's yarns of the Afghans. Better to roll to your gun and die like a soldier, he advised the British who might be wounded in Afghan battles on the steep sides of Khyber Pass, than to toss in pain until the Afghan women came down from the hills with knives to disembowel the still-living victims of their men's sure aim.

I searched out a map of Central Asia. Map-reading is a grave symptom, as anyone knows who is infected with the virus that ships, caravans and trains breed. When the wander-hunger is on, maps cease to be lines dividing pink and blue and yellow splotches of colour on a printed page. They come to life. From them floats the squeal of sing-song girls in brocaded jackets, clapping their slender hands in dusty brothels of old Cathay. One sees festival days in Scandinavian

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villages, or naked, ash-smeared holy men with long, matted hair, moaning in the grime of sun-struck Indian bazaars. The blue, marked 'ocean', turns to black waves tipped with silver as lightning flashes at night on a stormy sea.

I traced the way to Afghanistan on the map I thumbed that August afternoon. My purpose to settle down failed me.

On my thirty-third birthday one year later I was to wake in the walled palace of an oriental monarch, a guest at the King's castle in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

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CHAPTER II

My way to that walled palace, where fountains splattered in a lantern-hung garden and soft rugs were spread on terraces at tea time, was to be along a twisted road. New York, Copenhagen, Helsingfors, Moscow, Rastov-on-Don, Tiflis, Teheran, then eastward over mountains and deserts to Kabul.

Not until the southern domains of Red Russia faded into mid-Asia did my journey to mountain-locked Kabul bring me into contact with Islam. Only there began the hills, the sand, the shrouded women, the ancient king-slave ways, as Asiatic tribes, migrating over trails that civilization followed to build Nineveh and Hammadan, mingled with coarse-bloused citizens of the Soviets.

At this point, the break between modern Russia and the ancient East brought me some unpleasantness. Shadows of coming adventure in harsh kingdoms fell over me as I made my way into the mountains.

The train that had rattled boisterously down from Russia glided to a stop on the edge of Asia. The mud hut in the sandy waste at the side of the train was Julfa, and the end of railways for me.

At the Soviet Bureau in Tiflis I had contracted with a fluttering little Jew for an interpreter to meet me in Julfa and see me across the border into Persia, after providing a night's rest and food. I had paid for them, and I was ready for them.

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No interpreter appeared. I paced the sand by the side of my coach and watched straggling groups of Caucasians and Persians carrying bundles and bags to the south over the plain.

'Julfa?' I inquired of a train guard who was bent double and peering intently at some recalcitrant mechanism beneath a coach.

'Da Da,' he nodded affirmatively, without looking up.

Mountains, heaps of golden cinders, shut us in on all sides. I was alone, I could make no one understand me, and it was getting dark.

I removed my bags from the coach — eight pieces. By gestures the station master informed me that he would get someone to convey my luggage to the village a mile away over the sand. It was dusk as two Russians and I, all lugging baggage, took the footpath to town.

There was a score of mud huts at a low place on the rolling desert. The hotel was behind a mud wall. It had two large rooms opening on a squalid courtyard with a stagnant pool in the centre. There was a dining-room — two rickety tables set at a respectable distance from a brick stove.

I gave the last six roubles of Russian money I possessed to the men who carried my luggage. I had paid a trifle over three dollars for the roubles. To them it meant twelve cents in purchasing power, and they were hopping mad. They lingered, protesting, as I waited for the food I had ordered by pointing at it. But I could pay them no more. I had nothing but traveller's cheques and had deliberately run short of roubles because none is allowed to be taken out of

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Russia. I had paid for my Julfa accommodations in Tiflis, and was broke.

I ate a plate of boiled mutton, over which had been sprinkled the chopped tops of a few onions, and drank a glass of tea.

The porters had pulled up two chairs and were sitting by my side, making sporadic expostulations, accompanied by the ageless pantomime of snappily rubbing the thumb against the forefinger of the right hand.

I had finished off the mutton when the manager of the hotel came over. He also began urging that I pay the porters.

'Amerique', was all I could get of his talk. It was accompanied by a prodigal smirk, and a toss of the head which said, 'Aw — you're an American. Money means nothing to you. Pay these poor men'.

I could only shrug my shoulders and say, 'Roubles — Tiflis', at which the hotel proprietor laughed merrily. But I was soon to see him in another mood.

I gestured that I wanted to sleep, by putting my head in the palm of my hand and shutting my eyes, and was led to my bedroom.

One board bed, without a mattress, remained open for me. The other seven of these low-legged tables that served for beds were heaped with snoring, grunting shadows. The only light came in from the room across the hall. I made my bed by spreading coats on the boards and throwing a bathrobe over myself. As soon as I finished, the door was shut and I was left alone with the sleeping, thundering herd.

I was ready to drop off, when the door opened and the landlord and his wife came in with a lantern. Without looking to see whether I were asleep or not, he shook me. I jumped up. He motioned me to come outside. I did. He handed me a bill for thirty roubles. I explained to him in English — which of course he did not understand — that I had already paid for my board and lodging here in Tiflis, and then went back to bed.

In a few moments he was back again, this time with two Russians. Once more I followed them out, went through the same routine and retired.

I had fallen asleep when I was jerked up by the shoulders. The room was full of uniformed men. My room-mates were all awake and sitting up staring in the lantern light, while I was addressed in what I sleepily recognized to be an authoritative tone. A smartly uniformed G.P.U. officer was telling me what was what — I could tell that. His aide, holding a lantern in one hand and the landlord's bill in the other, gave meaning to his chief's words. Behind them in the vaguely lit room was a squad of soldiers.

I could only repeat — 'Roubles — Tiflis' and exhaust all the profane vocabulary I possessed at the time. I even demonstrated that I had no roubles by getting up in my underwear, taking my trousers from a hook above the bed and turning the pockets inside-out. It was a good thing that I took my trousers, for the police began hustling me out of the room. I stopped them long enough to get into my trousers.

They marched me to the police station, where — by

exhibiting the traveller's cheques I carried in a money belt — I somehow made it clear that though I was not a pauper, still I could not pay in roubles. I shouted, 'Persia nit roubles! Bank! Bank!'

The police official also shouted.

'Da Da,' I said, believing that in the silent hills of this dark village no bank would be open even if they did have one.

But my 'Da Da' set us off on a new march. My retinue increased. The loiterers around the police station joined the squad of soldiers and the landlord as they guided me through the starlit, mud-lined lanes, until we came to a residence and called up a sleepy, half-dressed Russian, who joined the front rank of the procession with the landlord, the G.P.U. officer and myself.

We came to a dark building. The latest recruit to our party had a key. He opened the door, lit an oil lamp on a counter almost chin high, and we all entered the Julfa Bank.

It was a mess of tall desks, littered with flimsy grey papers. Huge hooks about the size of those they use in a meat-packing house were hung along the wall. On them were impaled more reams of limp paper.

I took out a traveller's cheque. The banker, after upsetting sheafs of records, produced a facsimile of the cheque I offered. Each and every soldier and all of the hangers-on that had shoved their way into the bank, individually examined the two instruments. Each one made a speech. In the excitement the cheque was cashed. I paid the landlord, but forgot to countersign the cheque.

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I have always intended to trace that cheque, but never did. I imagine that the Julfa bank still holds it as a warning against accepting negotiable paper from travellers whom they rout out of bed and disturb so they are in no frame of mind for an exchange transaction.

I went back to bed with a clear conscience, angry, and was soon beyond any consciousness of the punishment the hard boards could administer to my weary bones.

Morning: water splashing in the fountain, a baby crying, the west side of the courtyard wall a silver sheet of sunlight, and sun on the western mountains.

I had slept soundly on the board bed. The anger and the fears of the night before had gone with the stars. I stuffed my bedding into a hand-trunk, the only piece I had opened, and was ready to go. The hotel proprietor, whose temper had been blotted up by the roubles, was quite agreeable as he lugged my baggage. He set it on the sand in front of the hotel. I sat down on it and looked toward the south. A mild wind, fresh and sweet, blew out of Asia through the dawn. It was cool and pungent and reminded me of the fresh air at sunrise in Montana. I felt good. Meadow-larks should have sung, but there were no meadow-larks.

A two-wheeled basket cart, drawn by a shaggy-haired pony and driven by a swarthy fellow shivering in the morning wind, came for me. The driver wore a long black coat that hung to the ground. When he walked from the cart to pick up my bags, I couldn't see his feet — he looked as if he were floating.

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Without a word, we took off over the hills, following a trail marked by a few wheel tracks, over one knoll, down another and on until, from the top of a rise, appeared a desert river and a bridge over its yellow water. A few yards back from the bridge was a mud compound, the customs house. Silently he trotted the shaggy pony down the hill, unloaded my stuff at the closed gate, and went back the way he came, disappearing over the knoll — his head above the edge of the cart like John the Baptist's on Salome's platter.

I went down by the river and sat on a log, and speculated as to how the log got there. There wasn't a tree in sight on the desert or on the limitless mountain sides that hemmed it in. If the sleeping house was an evidence of life, that's all there was.

The red half of the bridge was the end of Russia; its precise centre, where the blue began, was Persia. On the red side was a red sentry box. The sentry must have been taking a nap in the quiet morning. On the Persian side was a blue sentry box. The Shah's trooper, too, was sleeping. They had not had much to do for many months, for plague had struck the Persian villages and left them empty, to crumble away into the rocky dust of antiquity — nameless homes, where men and women had fretted and loved and died.

Both Persia and Russia seemed equally remote. I was between the two, wondering whether Ethel were going to be able to sublet the apartment on Riverside Drive so that she could have a holiday in the west.

Persia, Afghanistan, neither they nor any other place held charm or fear for me. Probably I was

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undergoing a reaction from the tension of my recent stay in Soviet Russia, the grilling experience of witnessing at first hand an ignorant and nervous nation in the throes of its labour pains, striving to give birth to a new social order. At all events, I was wholly unconcerned with what lay ahead of me. Had I had any notion of the weird, strenuous adventures that awaited me, I would certainly have turned back then and there. As it was, I smoked and skipped stones on the water.

It was getting on toward five o'clock, when at the top of the knoll, appeared a droshky — quite a startling anomaly in the desert — laden with a flaming-shawled and bright-jacketed Caucasian family: Grandma, grandpa, their children's children and all their worldly goods. At the closed gate to the bridge, layer after layer of them unloaded. They stood round their heap of bundles and the droshky vanished, as had my cart.

The men's feet were wrapped in straw, and the women looked like gipsies. They came over to the river bank, knelt down, took a drink and appropriated my log.

The smallest child was a girl, four or five years old. She wore a long, gathered skirt of many colours and a bodice. From beneath her little, scarf-bound head wisps of black hair fell over her running nose. An old hag, bony and diminutive at the side of the towering, dark-eyed men, seemed to be the matriarch. Her word was law, and her dress was as gay as the children's.

I was taking a swim, when suddenly a shrill shriek and a cry of pain brought me running up the bank. The Caucasian group were quiet except for the crying

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child across the matriarch's lap. As I came toward them, there was another yell. The old lady was utilizing the time, while waiting for Soviet officials to get up, by punching two bright, glistening hoops of brass through the infant's ears.

When at last the sentries awoke and the gate opened, I had to spend three strenuous hours checking voluted receipts; having my possessions put to almost microscopic examination; turning all the money I had in the world over to an official who put it in a desk drawer; watching them confiscate books I had bought in Russia, take one copy of *Vanity Fair* and leave me the other; then getting the money back, packing the bags, having the passport stamped, and handing all the roubles I had left to an attendant to pay for carrying my bags on to the bridge and setting them down on its exact centre, where the red ended and the blue began.

As I passed the Russian sentry box, the soldier leaning on his gun grinned good morning. The customs porter put the bags down on the boundary line and went back. I waved to the Persian sentry to come and help with my luggage. He was in a trim, khaki uniform, topped by a pillbox Pahlavi hat, of which I was later to become sicker than I ever was of any item of human garb. He cried to me in Persian, but stood his post. I waited, satisfied with the recognition.

Within half an hour a donkey and a ragged Persian popped over the approach to the bridge. The donkey and the man, apparently both conscious of the red line, stayed on their own side. As he tied my luggage

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on to the ass's back with a sheet of cotton, he motioned for me to climb on the animal along with the baggage, but I chose to follow him and his beast. The sentry glanced at my passport, came to attention, saluted, and I took off over the sand after the jackass.

I saw no village, and I could talk to no one. But I always work on the basis that along any road you choose people have been travelling for ages. One must follow the customs which those before have practised. There are only a few simple situations, and they are monotonously universal.

Full of confidence, I jogged along with the donkey-driver, who interrupted his grinning at me to glower at the ass, jab it in the haunches with a sharp stick and curse it. We stopped to tie on a bag that was coming loose.

The great empire of Sargon and of Darius lay ahead of me, and the Tigris and the Euphrates in whose valleys mighty civilizations had been born. I stood in the hills whence history had come: I was to leave them behind for other hills, for castles and wars, bandits and rival kings.

I looked back to Russia. I had been irritated and hungry there, my money had gone like water over a dam — and for nothing. I had been tied up in red tape, had slept in lousy hotels and been thirsty because I couldn't get bottled water. I had been looked on contemptuously as a man of property by people who held property in contempt, it was getting on toward noon and I was tired.

The donkey-driver finished making a few slipshod

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knots so that the bags would hold a while longer. He grinned again. I swung my hand toward Russia and shook my head as if to say, 'God! what a place!'

The driver's ears sharpened. He nodded his head quickly and spat — one, two, three, four times — in the direction of the U.S.S.R.

I smiled in agreement, and we strode on through the sand.

But I could not resist looking back now and again over my shoulder to Russia, where young people had a crazy aim of working and learning and trying and loving together — where they had been confident that each task they did was their part of making a new world.

We came over a rise in the land. Below was a mud town, glowing in the sun. A few yards ahead immaculate officers were drilling troops. There would be an officers' mess for me at noon. There would be French and English spoken and talk of politics and tariffs. Even in Persia a man can find his own kind, and life becomes simple.

I didn't turn again as we dropped over the hill. It was the shadow line. Behind me lay youth, with youth's dreams and daring, its idealism and clear-eyed wisdom.

I had crossed a bridge.

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CHAPTER III

JULFA was the beginning of the rough, romantic route I was to travel: the Khyber Pass lay ahead at the other. Pleased that I was started finally over the time-worn trail, I permitted myself some short hours of expansive well-being in the first flush of relief from the stringent going in Russia.

I strolled through the bazaar, bought bundles of mild, fragrant Persian cigarettes (to my notion, the best cigarettes in the world). I watched them rolled by nimble-fingered boys whose ages ranged from six to eleven.

Though I am afraid of motor-travel and fear high places, for the time being I forgot the mountain ranges that lay between me and Kabul.

At last the motor car I had hired came slipping up to the hotel gate. A rain-cloud split the sunlight and doused the yellow landscape with a downpour, darkening the mud walls and coating the parched trails with a slippery sheen.

The road ran wide and smooth into the hills. It narrowed only to squeeze hourglass-like through the gates of cities and then on, always upgrade, into the mountain range. I began to hope that perhaps the rumours of tortuous trails of which I had heard were exaggerated.

We stopped in one fantastic town; I do not recall its

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name, but it stands out in my memory photographically clear. Along both sides of the main street violent torrents tumbled; myriad rickety bridges crossed the rattling streams. Cypress trees, tall and straight, like two columns of soldiers, their plumed helmets high in the sky, stood along the banks.

I sat in a tea-house, the water rushing at my feet, and looked across the way at a long wall, blank in its full stretch except for a single oval gateway. A Persian woman in a blue-and-white checked *chuddar* stood by the gate and rapped and rapped with a heavy iron knocker. I wondered what was behind the mysterious gate, and whether beneath the veil there were laughing eyes or greedy, fearful ones, and for whom she knocked so long and patiently.

The sweet smell of opium hung round the door of the tea-house. The odour seemed fresh, stripped of its sensuousness as it drifted on the rain-cleared air. Persia was going to be, I thought that idyllic day, a soft pastel drawing magically come to life.

Only twelve hours were required to modify that fancy rather considerably. At about midnight we pulled into Tabriz, my first large mid-Asian city. The shutters were up in the bazaars; and the car, filling the road, crawled with difficulty into the sleeping city. Then it wheeled out on to a wide, mile-long street of snow-white crushed rock, lined by ditches and slender saplings.

On both sides of the road in open flat plots were what looked at first to me to be a vast scattering of grotesque bundles. Inhabitants of Tabriz were sleeping in the

open, away from walls and buildings. Many had been killed a few weeks before when an earthquake rocked the town.

I had been told previously that there was an hotel of the European sort in Tabriz, run by an Armenian, but I discovered that my car had left me at a native hotel instead. I refused to sleep in the littered room among the snoring Persians who slept on low beds in the flickering light of a fat candle, and hired a droshky to take me to the European hotel, which I ferreted out by driving up and down the avenue. The hotel had six rooms and was two stories high. Nobody there, including the Armenian proprietor, was asleep, in so treacherous a structure with earthquakes so recent. Persians cling loyally to the notion that earthquakes always occur around midnight. The fact that several of the last severe ones have occurred in mid-afternoon has nowise upset this belief. Amiably enough, my landlord showed me to the front apartment hung with rugs, and, best of all, boasting a wide bed with a mattress. He lit a kerosene lamp, brought me some water in an earthen jug and then hurried away out of the place as if he expected it to fall in on him should he linger another moment.

I dropped into the bed and fell asleep. Gradually I awakened, conscious of a thin, unbroken sound. It had seemed to come out of my sleep, but it was real though far away. Now it came nearer and became identifiable as a wail, unearthly in its sadness. I sat up. It became louder, a moaning chant. I went to the window. Down the highway a mob was moving, led

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by men in white gowns. Out of it came the swell of a lamentation — 'Ya Hossein, Ya Hossein!' It was a cry of pain.

In the moonlight the figures passed before my window. There was a glitter of knives. The mourners were hacking their foreheads and their cheeks, and blood was trickling down on to their gowns. The cries faded slowly as they had come, and I went back to sleep.

In the morning I was to learn that it was the ninth day of Muharram, when each year devout Mohammedans mourn the death of their Prophet's grandson. Though by the Shah's orders a cartful of knives had been taken away from fanatical believers the day before, his officials had not got all of them, and the climax of the forty days of grief was being celebrated in time-honoured fashion. I was urged however not to pay any attention to the masochistic fellows with the knives, who were getting the maximum of blood and howling and self-abasement out of what were really quite insignificant wounds.

I went about the city all day vainly trying to negotiate for transportation to Teheran with one of the sorrowing townsmen. But there was no lull in their grieving. The four days, beginning with the ninth, were the most sacred and saddest of the year. No business was transacted. The mosques were jammed with the faithful, sitting on rugs cross-legged, smoking hubble-bubbles and cigarettes and listening to mullahs from sunrise to sunset relating tales of Mohammed, while the women, heavily veiled, packed like a colony of pen-

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guins in the corner, listened and mumbled prayers. Battalions of soldiers, dirty fellows in khaki uniforms and white slippers, goose-stepped down the main highway, crunching the gravel to the cadence of a single shrill flute. No bands could play during Muharram, nor could there be entertainment of any sort.

The days of mourning at last over, the police handed back my passport, and I set about trying to book transportation for the five hundred miles to Teheran. I found that the few passenger cars in Tabriz are owned by rare affluent families, such of them as are available for hire being discarded, dilapidated wrecks worn out by frugal owners. Lorries are therefore the usual means of travel.

If there happens to be a lorry going one's way that has no return load, it can be had for private hire. But the best car over the main routes is the mail van. It is operated under government contract, and may have at least three whole tyres and a spare, not too threadbare. The mail van runs punctually twice a week: that is to say it usually leaves sometime before sunset on the day it is appointed to start at six a.m.

I was ready at six in the morning. My Armenian host, after he had packed me an elaborate outlay of provisions, chickens, cold meat, wine, and Russian black bread, informed me that the mail would leave somewhere about noon.

The sun was beating the siliceous gravel road into a molten mass when I went downstairs. My bags were loaded on to a droshky. The proprietor and all his staff were on the sidewalk to see me off. A tiny space

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was left for me to climb into. I had to put my feet on top of my baggage, hold my water jug in my lap, and hang on to my typewriter.

The droshky driver whipped the horses, we lurched into the street. I was looking round to return the farewell greetings of the Armenian, whose handkerchief was fluttering frantically above his head. The two mares trotted a moment, broke into a gallop, cut off the gravel road and started for the ditch. As they jumped the *jupe*, so did I. I landed on my feet on the other side, my typewriter safely in my hand, my water-jug broken. The droshky tipped over into the creek, and my luggage was strewn at my feet. The horses had had their fling and were standing idly as though what had happened was no part of their doing and of no interest to them. We righted the cart, loaded it again and were delayed only a moment longer while my Armenian hotel-keeper ran up and pasted on my handbag a lavender hotel sticker with the legend, 'Hello, hello'.

The courtyard where the mail lorry waited was littered with canvas-wrapped packages, and boxes overflowed from the warehouses around it. A couple of hundred people were squatting about or standing in groups. In a shady corner were a score of black-veiled women, their *chuddars* drawn over their faces. In so public a place they did not show even an eye.

Each package loaded on the lorry was the subject of lengthy arguments. Five hours later the lorry was ready to start. It was a ton-and-a-half vehicle, with a long body encased in stiff wire netting. Merchandise

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was packed half way to the roof; more was lashed to the top and tied to the sides.

This done, the possessions of the travellers were crowded in, then a final touch was added. A dozen or two vessels of brass, copper, and tin, all of the same design, were hung around the outside of the lorry, like decorations on a Christmas tree. The vessels had long necks and slender spouts protruding from bulbous bases, and looked identical to teapots I had seen used in Greenwich village studios.

The laws of the Prophet demand frequent ablutions. The Mohammedan must bathe his arms and legs in the ever present ditches and pools five times a day before prayer. And with water from vessels such as we carried he must cleanse himself after answering calls of nature.

Now the women came over from their corner and climbed far back into the lorry on top of the baggage; the men followed, squatting nearer the front, until twenty-two people had somehow fitted themselves in like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle.

I bought the whole front seat with the driver, paying two fares so that three of us would not be crowded on to the springless cushion. The back of the seat had been removed, a packing case of rough wood sufficed. At sunset, twelve hours after the scheduled time for departure, we were off climbing into the mountains over one of the most precipitous passes in Asia.

All was dark and silent behind in the lorry as though the Persians there had for the journey been changed by magic into inanimate baggage. The driver was taci-

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turn, his two assistants, youngsters of twelve or thirteen who rode the five hundred miles on the running board, were silent on their precarious perches, dreaming perhaps of the day when their apprenticeship as water boys, serving thirsty, leaky radiators, was over, they would themselves drive through their own village streets in a great black lorry with red wheels and with red roses painted on the doors, with water boys to wait upon them.

For several hours we climbed into the mountains and stopped at last at a lonely mud house. So dim was the candle-light inside that the low doorway looked like a jaundiced curtain. We got out. In the uncertain light of the hut I took my first look at my travelling companions. All but one were nondescript, filthy fellows with their black, ghostly women.

But one of them was a man of parts, several inches over six feet, gaunt and bony. His finger-tips, his moustache, and his palms were dyed with the brilliant reddish-orange of henna. Four wives were with him, the youngest about nine years old. She straggled along with the others, careless about her *chuddar*.

When a fire of desert brush blazed up in the corner of the tea house, where eggs were being scrambled in mutton fat, a diabolical reddish light flooded the smoky room. In it I caught a glimpse of the child-wife sipping tea. Her eyes were large and limpid, and the weird flame accentuated the deep black circles beneath them. There was the look of a woman in her soft smiling face.

The orange-fingered fellow, the driver, and another

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passenger smoked a pipe of opium apiece. We reloaded. I stood by while the passengers climbed over my seat and vanished in the black-lined end of the lorry.

Tea and opium did their work. The big gaunt man started to talk. He told endless tales of the desert. I recognized the monotonous rhythm of the dervish in his chant. Sometimes there was laughter from his audience but otherwise his sing-song words ran on uninterrupted, blending with the grind of the gears. When I flashed my light to get some matches out of my luggage, the women snatched their *chuddars* and covered their sleepy eyes.

Three days later, after a forced delay at the edge of a mountain torrent that could not be forded until the stream subsided, the driver, his brown face lined and drawn, wheeled the lorry through the gate in the thick wall that surrounds Kasvin. Dawn had not yet broken; it came as we stopped for an hour's rest.

Bony, barelegged water carriers dipped gourds into a tank car and threw the water on the dusty streets. Dust puffed a frame around each black splotch where the water struck. Crows, still as ebony carvings, sat in green niches of cypress trees. Flapping, raucous-throated crows winged circles above the branches. Tall impudent crows struck sleepy postures on walls. Blind beggars, beggars brushing off vast scabs from emaciated bodies, beggars with twisted legs and rotting fingers concentrated around the lorry, the only animated spot in the sleeping city.

With the first rays of the sun, the cool of night fled

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like a frightened animal. Clattering down, came the shutters from bazaars. The first sounds of the day were each one a distinct entity asserting itself before being lost in the howling clatter of the morning. Orange vendors and cucumber vendors carried their goods heaped in golden and green pyramids on great, round, straw trays atop their heads.

A man of God stalks down the road, his turban flashing white, his black tunic of the finest linen, and a wide green sash wrapped in flawless folds around his fat paunch, marking him out as a holy descendant of Mohammed. The tips of his loop-the-loop shoes are golden. A score of paces before he reaches our lorry with its surrounding group of beggars, he swerves from his course slowly like an ocean liner and steers toward us. There is a silken pouch dangling from his sash. He stops, fumbling a string of ivory prayer beads and with large soft hands opens the pouch as he nears the beggars. When he comes to them, he holds out one puffy paw, and the beggars drop copper coins into it. He puts them in the pouch, fumbles his prayer beads, resumes a gradual course to the centre of the road and vanishes down it, crows flapping overhead.

One by one, the passengers spread coats or rugs in the street, kneel upon them facing Mecca, throw their arms above their heads and begin the gymnastics of prayer. It's a good sign, it means we are ready to go on and that morning prayer will not make a delay later. In a few minutes we are off. The next stop — Teheran.

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CHAPTER IV

IT was in Teheran that I established my first tangible link with Afghanistan.

There was little definite information about Afghanistan to be had from Teheran residents, although there was much gossip. The wife of a Persian official dramatically told me that she had driven up to the Afghan border and that it was a terrifying experience. When I questioned her, I gathered that her terror had not been induced by any actual threatening incident, but rather was born of rumour. Nevertheless, she pointed to the plain band ring I wore and said, 'Why for *that* they will kill you'.

Afghanistan's centuries of strict, hostile isolation have built up these notions. Like a movie star who insists on making a mystery of her private life, rumours of her secret passions that filter abroad are tumultuous, peculiar, glamorous, and popular.

Foreigners have seldom been invited to Afghanistan. No tourist-bureau welcome hangs on her stern borders. Instead, a sign, 'It is positively forbidden to enter Afghan territory'.

Afghanistan, the belligerent hermit, dropped between India and Russia, has maintained its independence and its isolation.

The religion, the Asiatic disposition, and the egotistical pride of this nation of hillmen, coupled with the inaccessibility of their land, have built up a tradition of

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aloofness from the rest of the world. Time has passed them by. Seldom have they been conquered. When they were, conquerors did not stay long enough to influence them. As the rest of the world moved on, the incentive for isolation became even stronger. New ideas would upset the *status quo*. They would threaten the wealth of those few who were powerful and cast doubt upon the hitherto unquestioned teachings of the priests, making the holy men insecure. Outside contacts would add the complexities of foreign relations to the already heavy burden of a king constantly harassed by internal disturbances.

It was his Excellency Sher Ahmad Khan, Afghanistan's Ambassador to Persia, Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, one-time Prime Minister of Afghanistan, cousin of two former Afghan kings, and brother-in-law of the ruling king, who revealed to me some of the facts about his country and who made clear to me something of its temper. His talk was all of diplomacy, morals and murder, gibbets and hairbreadth escapes.

He received me at his summer residence at Shimran, high in the mountains overlooking Persia's capital. His embassy compound was relatively as inaccessible as his native country. My droshky on the way there twisted through a labyrinth of passage-ways lined with casual, crumbling walls. The road turned sharp corners that put the horse and cart at right angles and stopped at a low gateway in a high wall. Above it fluttered the red, green and black flag of Afghanistan.

Two Afghan soldiers stood at the portal dressed for

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foreign exhibition, but they hadn't laced up their shoes. Their military caps, poor excuses for turbans, were pushed back on their heads like the cap of a race-course tout watching his horse lose at the post. They seemed a far cry from hill bandits with homicidal habits. Yet these warriors not at war suggested by their uniforms a threat of violence in the peaceful neighbourhood — a blend of musical-comedy splendour and back-alley bravado.

I waited in the chancery half an hour past the time of my appointment. It was a jumble of desks pressed into a small room, littered with disordered papers. Leather chairs, dusty and apparently seldom used, were blowing grey bubbles of hair from abrasions in their upholstery. Swarthy clerks stared listlessly from their desks through the cracked French windows at a slimy pool outside. The garden was scraggly and untrimmed. The mosquitoes reconnoitring from their swampy base were, even in the morning, looking over prospects for their night distributions of malaria.

Sher Ahmad Khan himself could hardly be blamed for his down-at-the-heel embassy. Afghan monarchs, whenever they are short of pocket money, exercise their first economy by neglecting for several months at a time to transfer funds for ambassadorial salaries and maintenance.

No penury was evidenced in Sher Ahmad's own person, as he loomed, suddenly filling the entrance to the chancery. If the soldiers had not been up to my preconceived picture of Afghans, his Excellency's size and ferocity of appearance fulfilled all the requirements.

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Chairs stopped blowing bubbles, clerks fell to their work as he made the imperceptible pause befitting the entrance of a head man. He wore a white panama hat turned down all around. It was for contrast. His eyebrows were as thick as his thumbs and made an uninterrupted hedge from temple to temple. His eyes were coal-black and starry. A hawk nose and full, tightly drawn mouth were in proper proportion with his large face. He stalked through the outer office into his chambers.

I had come to begin negotiations for a visa. It was actually five weeks before visa number six was inscribed in my passport. It was thought better that I have letters to each governor through whose province I was to pass, and have those letters authorized by his Majesty Nadir Khan's foreign office.

Sher Ahmad Khan was graciously promising to attend to my affairs. He snuffed ground powder from a tiny crystal bottle and lit an English cigarette, then pushed a box of them toward me and said, 'Smoke?'

His Excellency began formally. He discussed the general foreign policies of his nation — the ageless policies of countries great or small; robbing Peter to pay Paul; manœuvring for allies and trusting none, like American gang alliances with the same greed, suspicion, and the same indifference to bloodshed.

Although the identical elements prevailed, Sher Ahmad's stories were not laid in quiet Downing Street nor Wilhelmstrasse nor a mid-town hotel. They clashed in barbaric intrigues devised against the grim, sordid walls of Kabul. Colour and passion made them

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fantastic, but they were real and true. I listened, fascinated, to this first rambling talk of authentic Afghanistan. The stories I heard then were to click into their place later in a fabulous yarn of mid-Asian intrigue that I was to collect in Kabul.

Sher Ahmad began ponderously, but he knew his way as a born dramatist knows it.

The discourse of this leading Afghan combined bits of mechanistic philosophy with a generous dose of sentimental interpretations of the Koran. Symbolism, and more parables than a big-time evangelist could devise for a tabernacle full of affluent converts, were readily at his disposal. If some of his ideas were vague, this fault was mitigated by the force of their utterance.

He had accompanied Amanullah on his Majesty's triumphant tour of Europe, returned to become his Prime Minister just as the revolution sent the young king running from his shattered dream of a modern nation and put the bandit son of a water carrier on the throne.

Sher Ahmad stood by until Nadir Khan deposed the bandit, and then made the jump to the reactionary king's government as Ambassador to Persia.

He outlined the foreign policy of the nation. I listened and liked his way of telling it, though it was only a bare suggestion of the goings-on I was to see in the Afghan capital.

'So far as the foreign relations of our country are concerned', he declared, fumbling his snuff bottle, 'we have nothing but goodwill, and our king is not aggressive. He does not have territorial ambitions. His

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Majesty says, "I have plenty of land. More than I need. It is now my duty to cultivate and develop the resources of my country — a task of many years. Until that is done, certainly no aspiration for a greater domain is entertained".

'When either of the two powers most interested in Afghanistan show an enmity toward us, we shall always appeal to the other of those powers. Should England become aggressive, we would call upon Russia; and should Russia attempt to exploit or curtail our national existence, England would be our willing ally.'

I wanted to know how he managed to steer his way through the maze of intrigue and violence that marked the interval between the reigns of the two kings he served, and how he had survived Bacha Saquo's, the bandit ruler's, interlude between Amanullah and Nadir Khan.

The story he told me was a harbinger of those that were to be a daily diet when I reached his Excellency's native land. One yarn had its setting in Kabul at the height of the fanatical religious fury which burst around the head of Amanullah and launched the bandit leader, Bacha Saquo, upon a short-lived reign. Tortures and violent deaths were the order of the day. The uncertainty of the usurper was driving him to refinements of cruelty. Retaliations of the deposed were not less savage. The nation's heritage of sadism, courage, and banditry were on the rampage. The savage capital was aflame. The king had fled. Sher Ahmad Khan was then the Prime Minister. He was beleaguered in his palace with his family.

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I asked his Excellency how he escaped with his life.

'It was', he said, putting his finger upon the bridge of his nose and leaning far over the table, 'it was God; it was a miracle. It was only God working a miracle. I will tell you.

'At one o'clock at night when the city was in turmoil, a knock came at my gate. My wife, her mother and my mother were alone in the palace with the servants. My family begged me to make my way out at the rear of the house and escape, for they said the call was without doubt for me to face the bandit king, against whom I had been fighting.

'Should I go away and leave my family? I am a brave man. Afghans are a brave people. "No," I said. "I will not flee. If I escape, I will have my life; but they will have yours. I will go to them, for it may be that in that way we can all escape." I was not afraid. I went to the gate. There were hundreds of soldiers. An officer told me that his Majesty commanded my presence at once. I walked through the dark streets of the capital to the palace of the bandit king.

'I stood before him.

'He said, "What have you to say for yourself? You have been an adviser of Amanullah, you have fought against me."

'I said, "Yes, your Majesty." '

Here His Excellency embellished his tale with pantomime. He stood up and went to the side of his desk, facing his empty chair as though in it were seated the

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kingly son of the water carrier, and continued his story, as if speaking to the usurper.

'"I advised Amanullah. Amanullah's failures, to which you and the mullahs objected, were caused by Amanullah's not taking my advice. I admit also that I fought your Majesty. But if one of your Majesty's officers refused to obey your command, you would execute that officer.

'"Yes," the Shah replied, "I would."

'"So I have served Amanullah as I would always serve my king and as your officers would serve you", I argued.

'His Majesty listened to me attentively, and at the end of my speech ordered me to be hanged at once.

'Until then my hands had been free. Now soldiers bound them behind my back and led me to the police headquarters. Here in the courtyard outside the office of the Chief of Police the gibbets were erected. I was standing below the gibbet. The rope was above my head.

'I looked through the doorway, and there in the court caught the eye of the Chief of Police. I had seen him informally and knew him only by sight. He came to me, led me to a chair, and said, "Your Excellency, please be seated".

'I said, "I cannot. I am no longer your Excellency or Prime Minister, and my arms are lashed behind me."

'He ordered my arms to be released, and I sat down. Then the Chief of Police said, "You do not remember me?"

I said, "Yes; I know you are the Chief of Police".

'"But you do not recall what you have done for me?" he asked.

'"I do not know," I said; "I only know I have met you several times."

'"You may perhaps recall," he replied, "when as Chief of Police I came to your Excellency, you were the President of the Parliament. I came before you with a petition for the return to me of my lands, which had been unlawfully confiscated by your uncle, then the Governor of Kabul. You heard my claim and, ignoring the nepotism and the powerful influence of his office, you heard the cause of justice and returned to me my land."

'You know that a man leading such a busy life as mine would have no reason to remember a single instance of that kind — I had forgotten the case.

'The Police Chief went to the telephone. He called his Majesty at two-thirty in the morning. It was very bright in the room, for it was lighted by electricity. I listened to the conversation which he began. "Your Majesty, I have been loyal, and I am keeping order in your city now, and I ask you just one favour. I want you to pardon his Excellency."

'The King refused the long plea made by the Police Chief. Perhaps an hour elapsed. At last I heard the Chief say, "I will execute your Majesty's orders!" Then he commanded his men: "Put the rope around his neck."

'I was led into the courtyard. Outside the window a rope thrown over the gibbet was placed around my

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neck, but it was not pulled taut, for the Chief of Police was obeying his Majesty's orders to the letter. He had been told to put the noose around my neck. His Majesty had not told him to hang me. While I stood thus, the Police Chief continued to make his plea, then suddenly hung up the receiver. He came toward me. I was perfectly calm. At no time during the ordeal had I feared.

'He said, "Congratulations, your Excellency".

'Everything turned black, and I fell forward. I had had no fear. I was ready to die if it was God's will, but when the word "congratulations" came to my ears, I fell. They gave me some sherbet — you know what sherbet is. It is a red drink. I gained consciousness.

' "Congratulations", he said again, took me by the arm, placed me in his motor and drove me to my home. My family wept when I came in, not because they were sad, but because they were glad to see me back again.

'The following morning I called the Chief of Police. He came to my residence. I said to him, "My palace here and the grounds are yours. You have given me my life. I give you my property".

'I was allowed to leave the country.'

I was listening, my eyes starting, and was eventually granted my visa to Afghanistan by his Excellency.

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CHAPTER V

On the eve of my departure from Teheran for Afghanistan that country seemed farther away than New York.

In Persia's neurotic capital, Western ways have grown like tumours on Islamic life. These familiar things made me feel close to home. I particularly enjoyed taking a bet in Teheran, even money that I would not get safely through the stormy, tragic country for which I was to set off alone on the following day.

Though Persia and Afghanistan have some things in common, they are contrasting Moslem nations. Both are links in that chain of countries across Central Asia from Turkey to Tibet that form a barrier between Russian aggression in the North and British domination in the South. But Persia has sought modernization and laid itself open for British and Russian exploitation. Afghanistan treasures its independence, and to its fanatical people modern ways are anathema.

Both Afghans and Persians are Mohammedans, but of different sects. The Persians are Shiahs; the Afghans, Sunnis. Afghanistan holds to the harsh laws of the Prophet, and codes are based on Islamic precepts, largely administered by the ecclesiastics. Persia has strayed from the strict path of the Prophet, with a modern court system and a general liberalization of Islamic customs, that permit an aping of Western modes.

On my way this last evening through Teheran to a

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farewell party my droshky bumped between the kaleidoscopic shiftings of East and West that lined the wide avenue. Shutters were being put up for the night over the windows of a Dutch mercantile company displaying men's soft grey hats and dressing-gowns. A Persian at a ditch along the street washed his hands and feet and then dipped a sheet of flat bread into the same murky water. Near him hung the carcase of a sheep, dripping blood on to the rough sidewalk. A limousine loaded with Persian dignitaries sped past, mingling the fumes of burned petrol with the greasy smoke from broiling mutton that poured from the dim cavern of a coffee house. Behind dull mud walls were mansions set in dreamlike gardens. Muezzins from minarets: 'God is great, God is great. Come to prayer, for prayer is better than sleep.'

My droshky reined up before a gate in a mud wall hung with red, green, and blue lights. Behind the wall were gathered those who found wine and dancing better then either sleep or prayer. It was Teheran's night club. It was called Astoria.

A long, arbored passage led to the garden, where tables were placed around a dance floor, which consisted of vast rugs spread on the ground in front of an orchestra stand. A jazz band was playing a torch song current on Broadway.

'Make the most of the dance,' advised my host, a retired British army officer long stationed in the East. 'You will find nothing like this in Afghanistan. Sudden and violent death would be the penalty there for such goings-on as you see here to-night.'

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At tables under drooping trees sat Persian parties. The men, their pill-box caps set jauntily on their heads, throughout the meal chattered among themselves. Their women, ignored, looked out from behind their veils with soft eyes. They were like dark ghosts at a feast. They stared at two Persian girls in European dress — two of the very few in Teheran who took advantage of the Shah's ruling that women might come out of *purdah*, with the consent of their men — dancing with two young Turks. Persian men gave the dancers little notice. They have not been accustomed to find passion beneath gay evening gowns. For them love has for centuries come wrapped in black. The way out of tradition and habit takes longer than the writing of a Shah's decree.

Europeans who had cast their lot in with the hybrid life of the city and stayed too long away from home added strange touches – melancholy and comedy. Fox-trots and shaded lights were hard put to it to bring back to these grey souls the gaiety which had fled.

At a table framed by the vine-covered wall was an habitué of Astoria. He was probably thirty-five years old. Shrapnel and gas, barbed wire and artillery booming, dead men all around him had put a stare of cynical terror in his bulging blue eyes. The puffs of dissipation had retreated into saggy folds of skin beneath his eyes. His colourless lips were set as firmly as his bristling red hair that darted from his skull, which had a deep dent over the ear.

He sat alone, double brandy was his drink and he did not watch the dancers. He only glared at the

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arbored entrance, though he noticed no one who came in.

His work was finished, but he would not go back to Britain. He had come into the East pursued by a dream of oriental beauty — a dream born in the wet air of London. He had made it come to life under an oriental sun, and he was finished. But the building he designed may puzzle scholars two thousand years from now. He had erected a structure of graceful curves, and adorned it with silver and blue mosaics so fragile and timid they shrink from the sun and bloom when the moon hangs over the snowy peak of Demavend.

Now he was like a dead man whose ghost drank brandy.

Another Englishman, a one-time major, long in business in the Near East, banished homesickness in another way. He had just arrived at Astoria at the end of a three-day celebration, the incidents of which he identified by referring to the evening of the second day, or the morning of the third day.

It was on the morning of the second day that the major threw into the *jupe*, the chaste Pahlavi caps of all the Persian policemen who had crossed his path. It was the noon of the second day that a report was circulated that he had been stabbed. The report, erroneous, was no doubt fathered by a widespread wish.

And it was on the evening of the third day that he caught his real stride. He emerged triumphant from his club, with his appetite for action whetted by a quick fistic victory that had put two of his surly countrymen in the fountain.

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He arrived at Astoria late in the evening.

Among the tables of distinguished guests was one group from the Russian legation — a burly group of proletarian diplomats out for a night of bourgeois pleasures.

The major, at our table, took the evening calmly until I said I wanted a droshky to take me to Shimran and that I wanted one with a good horse.

'I'll get you that droshky now,' said he.

He was gone a quarter of an hour, and we had forgotten him, when the tables in the far end of the garden manifested excitement. Our table was by the dance floor near the orchestra. I looked up to see the major making his way through the tables, leading an amazed, white cab-horse. He brought it across the dance floor.

'I couldn't get a droshky through the gate, but here is a fast horse for you.'

Teheran's night club had all the proper appointment's except a bouncer. The group from the Soviet legation now assumed a bouncer's duties. Two of them came over to remove the horse, which by this time had become adjusted to the scene and was showing its teeth to all who cared to have a look.

The major objected.

'You turn the café into a stable,' said one of the Russians.

'What are you doing in a bourgeois playground?' retorted the major, and started a fight which upset everyone but the horse.

At our table we talked of Afghanistan and my journey of the morrow. 'You'll find cruelty there — the

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cruelty of a strong people consistently fighting to hold on to their ancient ways. It's a different existence than this hybrid life breeds. Nothing like that,' my host said, as he nodded toward a table where an old Persian doctor sat with his French wife.

The girl was young, slender, and voluptuous. Her deep-blue eyes, shaded by heavy, dropping lids, set in a doll-like face, followed every man who entered the garden. She had refused her husband's wish that she should wear a veil. Across her white forehead was a raw scar. The doctor had made it while she slept. It might be just as good as a veil, he thought.

'You'll find cruelty in Afghanistan, too. It will shock you more than this,' he continued. 'A friend of mine once talked with Abdur Rahman, who ruled Afghanistan forty years ago. He always recalled the startling characterization His Highness gave of his own subjects.

'Amir Abdur Rahman was eating ice cream on the terrace of the Kandahar Palace. He was chatting with my friend, an engineer, outlining plans for subduing belligerent tribal chieftains and hammering together a stronger realm. Four hundred rebel troops were marched into the courtyard. Their tall bodies swayed in rough, pointed-toed shoes. The ends of their bulbous turbans fluttered in the hot wind.

'The Amir paused in his eating, whipped a fleck of foamy cream from his grizzled, black beard, removed another splatter from the golden medallion on his blue military blouse. He turned to the officer in charge of the rebellious troops.

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"Put out their eyes," he ordered.

The court blinder, called "doctor" in the presence of squeamish Europeans, went skilfully to his task.

The Amir resumed his eating. As he stirred the last of the melting ice, his voice, mingling with the yells of pain from the blinded men below, cried "You say I am an iron ruler. I rule an iron people." '

It was late on the afternoon following this conversation that I rode through the east gate of Teheran to take the 2500-mile road across Persia, Baluchistan, and over the land of the iron people.

Both Persians and foreigners in Teheran were interested in the venture I was to set out upon. Therefore, I valued the ceremony which wanderers in far places perform for another who is going beyond their own distant horizons.

Friends — Germans, British, Russians, business and diplomatic, miles from their native lands — were driving me to a distant mountain caravanserai where my lorry was to follow, pick me up at midnight, and begin the journey eastward.

These restless priests of the wandercult, living links in the chains of empires and international trade, maintain a perennially naive interest in lands they have not seen. They are inveterate readers of travel books and seem never to get their fill of strangeness and adventure. Perhaps they find that thoughts of new places ease their nostalgia. I do not know. But the advice they gave me twice saved my life, and I shall long remember their farewell.

During the first seventy miles with this party I felt

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as if we were being lifted by a tentacle of pseudo-modern Teheran, to be set down in the ancient days of the East.

We arrived after nightfall at a caravanserai — a stark, rectangular fortress of baked clay perched on a cliff a hundred feet above a torrential mountain stream. A trio of cypress trees outside the wall seemed to touch the bright moon hanging high. Inside the huge, open courtyard of the caravanserai scattered charcoal fires glowed like small volcanic craters. They cast an erratic light on segments of two shadowy rings that one within the other circled the enclosure. The inner ring was made by the bulbous burdens camels had carried during the day. The outer ring was of the squatting camels themselves, the bells on their chins tinkling as they chewed their cuds.

Where the light of a fire struck the supercilious smirks on the beasts' faces, the smirks seemed to say, 'Have not men and nations and civilizations come and gone along these trails? But doesn't the camel always have a cud and a bell and men to guard him while he rests and meditates and chews?'

The spasmodic chimes of the bells and the grunts of sleeping drivers fitting their tired bodies to the rough earth were the only sounds except for the rumble of the torrent far below. It was the Asia of Zarathustra, Darius, and Mohammed. Our European dinner spread beneath the trees, our Western chatter of New York, Berlin, and Rome, seemed as out of place as though one sat in a night club and gossiped about Nineveh and Babylon.

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A CARAVAN AT REST

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Ludmila was my dinner partner. Her blue frock, blue hat and blue slippers had just come from Paris. Her blue eyes were ever questioning, as if asking what might have been if worlds were only static. She remembered her flight from Russia. She was very young, but her woman's admonition was ages older than the ancient caravanserai, 'On your journey you must be very careful. You must not be hurt'.

Far through the hills came the roar of a motor lorry, its cut-out open. There was an occasional flash of light in the hills across the river. It dropped evenly downward, disappeared, and reappeared again. Then it was gone. There was a sullen, sputtering protestation of water cut off in its flow. My lorry was fording the stream below. As the whine of grinding gears drowned the camel bells, I knew I should soon be on my way.

All glasses were filled. The light of the approaching lorry climbing the hill struck the cypress trees, turned and flooded the trail ahead — the golden trail to Samarkand, over which Alexander had dragged the philosophy and beauty of ancient Greece. Along it Omar Khayyám, astraddle his white donkey, had studied the stars and sung. The wanderers were ready to initiate the novice. They spoke not of people. My host lifted his glass.

'To the road,' he said, 'to the gay, dangerous road.'

'To the road,' the others repeated.

A litre of Persian wine vanished in a collective drink. The ritual was over. Then cosmopolites became provincials. It is inevitable as the time arrives for those

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final gratuitous admonitions, hastily called by stay-at-homes when warning bells clang at railway stations and 'all ashore' rings through the corridors of departing liners. Aunt Martha leaving the country for the city and Livingstone bound for darkest Africa have heard variations of the same hysterical advice.

'Remember what I told you about the water in Astrabad.'

'Don't forget, if you run into trouble at Dozdab, see . . .'

'Don't pay more than . . .'

'Don't believe . . .'

'Yes, your luggage is secure.'

'Cheerio, cheerio!'

The roar of a racing engine, a lurch that sent me against the back of the seat, and I was looking down from a high turn in the mountains on to the flickering fires in the caravanserai and the silver torrent far below it. I was on the road.

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CHAPTER VI

WITH me were the Meshed mail and two dozen Persians, packed in the back of the motor — a tired machine, the life ground out of it by day-long drags in low gear up the sides of precipitous ranges and more days grinding in low gear down narrow, steep trails. My seat with the driver was little better than the floor of the lorry, on which the other passengers sat. The back of the seat was a board. The cushions, exhausted by the eternal bumps, were lifeless.

Motors, though the chief means of transportation throughout the country, are generally dilapidated. The fatalistic driving of Mussulmen over ill-kept roads cracks the most resilient springs, which are then supplanted by a log of wood tied to the framework of the car to keep the radiator from resting on the front axle, and the fenders off the booted tyres. Ruts on the trail seem to meet every revolution of the wheels.

By day the grey-brown sands and the rocky heights glared in the molten heat. I seldom saw the blazing daylight except through the blur of dark sun-glasses, which gave the darkening effect of an eternally gathering thunderstorm.

By night the stars pulled very close to the mountain tops. The air cooled rapidly. A woollen jacket, that would five hours before have been torture, became comfortable. If we were going through low places, we slept during the day in the shade of a huge boulder and

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travelled in the cool of the night. The roads under the new Persian Shah are relatively safe from bandits.

Sometimes hours passed without sighting any life. Occasionally a few gazelles, with the airy grace of tumble-weeds blown in the wind, leaped down a valley. Empty petrol tins flashed by the wayside. Sometimes a mountain goat looked down from a canyon crag, or a long camel caravan, crowded against the cliff side, like a living bas-relief, would leave scanty room on the tortuous mountain-trail for a motor to pass.

Isolated in endless heaps of barren mountains and separated by scores of miles of rock-strewn deserts, Persia's mud cities, built behind mud walls, baked in the sun. Women, shrouded in veils that hide ignorance, disease, and poverty, waddled like huge, black crows through the dim corridors of chattering bazaars. In squalid hovels, hidden from the streets by barricades of clay, there squatted on thick planks the thousands who carry on Persia's main industry — children, women, and hopeless men, tying, knot by knot, the threads of shimmering rugs.

In villages beggars drooled and whined; merchants left their cell-like shops to drink from the ever-present ditches that edge the streets, and sheep and dogs ambled by. My rattling lorry, bulging and overloaded, passed scrawny pilgrims bound for distant shrines. The beards of the holy travellers were dyed a brilliant orange. Their finger-tips, their toes, and their donkeys' tails were stained the same bright hue. In scattered fields tribes recently at war ploughed with wooden sticks and oxen — to grow red and white

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opium poppies so that sweating coolies might sleep at night in silver dream-castles.

It might have been an opium dream — that weird incident at Damghan a few nights later.

Late in the evening my lorry bumped through the gate of the ancient mud city on the site of other ancient mud cities, long swallowed by time and stony sands. By the light of a lantern I was eating a midnight supper of rice, mutton, cucumbers, and wine in a tea garden that seemed to be a narrow island between two creeks that cut through the town. Two dogs which had leaped the creek whined at my side for food. Under the drooping tree two Persian prostitutes lowered their veils, to expose mascaraed eyes. Their leers from beneath their chaste *chuddars* were startling — it was like being solicited by nuns.

A Persian servant, swinging a lantern, pushed through the beggars on the narrow foot-bridge, and approached me: 'American come to friends,' he said.

I knew that an archaeological expedition was headquartered in the city, and I assumed that he made reference to them. I followed his bobbing lantern for half an hour between stark, mud walls which lined the narrow street. Abruptly he stopped and pounded furiously on a huge cypress gate. There was a long silence, then the rattle of chains, and we were admitted by another servant to a barren compound. No lights were burning. I could hear a fountain splattering. On the veranda, like conical, white wraiths, were beds hung with mosquito netting.

As we came close, the occupants of the beds called

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out directions to the servants. They spoke neither German nor English, which I knew to be the languages of the expedition. They spoke Russian.

I was shown into a long, narrow, whitewashed room furnished with three benches, two plain tables, and a kerosene lamp. A military map hung on the wall.

Two men dressed in white entered the room, followed in a moment by three more. There was a clicking of heels and many short, crisp bows as the oldest member of the party, a tall Russian with curtly trimmed beard and a monocle introduced his four comrades — all of them Czarist *émigrés*, two of them titled. A third, presented as general, was a small, baldheaded man with a gigantic handle-bar moustache twisted to sharp points far into space at each side of his parchment-like cheeks. Their faces and hands were burned darker than the natives by the desert sun. In contrast, the whites of their eyes glittered brightly.

'We learned that you were on your way from Teheran,' explained the old man, after I was sure that they had nothing to do with the archaeological expedition.

I was still in the dark as to why I had been sent for. There was an hour's talk, during which they quizzed me about my impressions of Soviet Russia. I had just about decided that these sun-scorched outcasts wanted only to talk of their native land.

I made ready to go. It was about two in the morning, and my lorry was to leave at three.

'We have not explained why we sent for you,' said the stubby general. With a Russian flair for drama,

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they looked from one to another as if acquiescing by silent ballot that the time had come for the tremendous disclosure.

'We can make you rich — richer than even your American countrymen,' the old man said. He seemed to be watching the effect of his pronouncement intently with one staring eye. The reflection of light on the monocle blotted out the other.

When one is offered fabulous riches in the middle of the night in the mountains of Persia by entire strangers, the least one can do is to smile amiably. This I did.

'And if you can interest your friends in us and lend us capital to carry on our work, you will all be rich,' he continued.

'I don't know anything about speculative investments,' I said apologetically, making for the door.

'Wait!' exploded the general. 'It is no speculation. There is no chance to lose.'

'It's gold,' said the old man.

'Gold,' repeated the general, 'tons of gold!'

'Show him, Alexander.'

We gathered around the unpainted table. The old man held a long, bony hand close to the kerosene lamp. The young fellow produced a test tube from his pocket and poured shimmering dust into the outstretched, brown palm.

'The desert is covered with it! It's in the sand!' they declared.

'Do you wash it out?' I asked.

'Nit, nit,' chimed contemptuously. 'We have an aeroplane engine and a propeller. We BLOW the gold

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out of the sand. This summer we have already blown that test-tube full. Now all we need is more money to perfect our equipment and we'll be rich.'

As I walked through the garden on my way to the gate, the general was still talking feverishly. Pent-up energy, lashed on by dreams of Midas, seemed to make him tremble like a plane when the motor is raced. And I thought, foolishly, that if someone should cry 'Contact' and jerk down on one end of his handle-bar moustache, it too would spin like a propeller and carry him over the desert blowing wealth from the sand, even farther and farther away from the great empire of Russia, that he and his stupid, emotional kind threw away in a like crazy chase for fool's gold.

Two days later the mail van dragged itself painfully over the top of a mountain. Far along the valley below was Meshed. We started down a steep road that turned sharply about a hundred yards from the summit. At the angle was a sheer drop of four hundred feet. There were wheel tracks which vanished at the edge of the precipice. Below lay the smouldering chassis of a lorry. Bodies of twenty-six victims were being carried away. It was easy to see how the accident had occurred. To get round these numerous hairpin turns necessitates going into reverse several times before the cramped front wheels can safely graze the edge.

But the frequency of such tragedies in the rugged Mohammedan hills is not due to the fact that camel trails are also used for motors, nor do the accidents happen to the rare car that has defective brakes. It is Allah's will. The consistency with which my drivers

were committed to that viewpoint cost me many bottles of brandy. It seemed better to be only vaguely conscious of their fatalistic motoring.

I could not get transportation, either caravan or motor, to Herat, Afghanistan, which lies about 150 miles eastward from Meshed. Persian motor companies would not risk a car in the forbidden land. An Afghan trading corporation expected a caravan loaded with sheep-gut from Herat within two weeks. They did not know how soon it would return. It might be a month. I decided to wait.

But Meshed in July is hardly a holiday town. I soon decided to add twelve hundred desert miles to my itinerary and get to Kabul faster than I could have done by waiting for the caravan.

This route led me south from Meshed to Dozdab, with the mountains of Afghanistan paralleling most of the way on the eastern horizon. From Dozdab I would cross Baluchistan to Quetta and enter Afghanistan on the southern border near Chaman. On this route I could look forward to three hundred slow miles by rail.

It was to be a four-day journey from Meshed to Dozdab. I hired a lorry and a crew, abandoning the crowded weekly mail service.

Because I was told I could not be sure, in case of a breakdown, of being picked up but once in six days, I carried a week's supply of water in petrol tins. My servants filled a goat-skin from a ditch, using the water impartially for their ceremonial excremental rites, the motor, and drinking purposes.

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I was ill with dysentery as we pulled through the South Gate of Meshed to ride a night in the hills before going on to the long wastes of sand. My tall, bony-faced Persian driver spoke no English. I could use but a few phrases that would get for me my few simple wants. My party was made up of the sullen driver, a mechanic, and a man-servant, whose duty it was to boil my water, forage for food, cook, and make up my bed.

We planned to ride only at night, as the roads were comparatively safe from bandits, and the heat of the day was so intense on the low deserts that even the smuggling of arms from the Gulf to the Afghan border eased up during the July heat.

The first night we lost five hours with tyre trouble. The squalid village in which we stopped early in the morning and prepared to stay the day was a vermin-ridden, stinking place. I preferred the road. It was 118° in the shade as we pushed out to the desert. The trail was marked by stones and so rough that the constant bumping only varied in intensity. Before the day was through, the jolting lorry had opened up the sores on my skinned spine. My legs and arms were bruised from striking the door latches. I had hit the roof so often and so hard when the car crashed into unseen pot-holes that my cork sun-helmet was crushed. The sweat poured over my eyes and clogged in the leather cups that encircled my sun-spectacles. I ached from dysentery and waited only for the blazing sun to drop behind the roasting mountains.

The driver stopped at one of those inexplicable mud

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huts that suddenly pop up on the lonely trail miles from the nearest village. He smoked two pipes of hashish, with much snorting and blowing. The bubbling of the water in the pipe when he pulled the drugged smoke through it seemed fittingly to be boiling in the blazing air. The other two servants smoked opium. None of us spoke. I drank some hot tea to save water and lay back on the filthy carpet that covered a clay bench. Listlessly I slapped crawling bugs and fanned away singing insects. Though I had slept but little the previous night, I could not even doze in the afternoon heat.

We were on our way after an hour at the rest house. I peeled some eggs and washed them down with brandy. I wetted my hands in lysol solution before smoking a cigarette. The smell of the lysol under my nose made me think of the cool hospital room where I imagined I belonged.

The sun went down. I calculated that we could make Berjand by three o'clock in the morning. The driver, well under the influence of drugs, stared blankly ahead as we crashed into bump after bump. The boys in the back of the truck were sleeping though they were being shaken around like dice in a box. At every stretch of rocky sand that looked at all level the driver would speed to thirty miles an hour. Fifteen miles would have been too fast.

I ached and drank more brandy. The driver stopped and settled himself in the seat to sleep. I shook my head and said, 'Berjand.'

Reluctantly he started the car again. Ten miles

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farther on he stopped again, leaned back in the corner and closed his eyes. I shook him and ordered, 'Berjand! Berjand!'

The boys awakened. The three of them chattered — the driver irritably joining in.

Again he stepped on the starter, put his foot on the accelerator and started to career across the desert at high speed. We smashed into rut after rut with terrific force. I kicked his foot off the accelerator, pointed to the speedometer, and swore at him.

He speeded again.

I hit the roof, smashing my helmet. I took it off to straighten it. As I did, another bump sent my bare head against the car top. It stunned me for a moment. When I came to, the driver's face was set. He watched me out of the corner of his eye as he continued at high speed.

Two wires connected by a twist instead of a key on the dashboard made the ignition circuit. I jerked these wires apart. The car stopped. The Persian flew into a drugged rage. I struck him on the chin. I could give no force to the blow. He turned in his seat to free himself from the wheel. As he did, I grabbed him by the throat.

It was a ghostly scene that dawned on me in those seconds. The men in the back of the car slept. The narcotic-laden driver made strange noises, his eyes popping out. And then I saw everything sanely. The stars very close above us, the mountains in the distance, the still, desert night. I was trying to kill a man in my drunken sickness because he had bumped my head.

I dropped my hands, leaned back in my seat and

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took out my cigarettes. As I did so, he rubbed his neck, bent over the wheel, connected the wires, stepped on the starter, and we were off. He said nothing for several miles, then jabbered in Persian, pointing to his face and indicating that I had hurt him.

Just as dawn was breaking we coasted down a barren hill. Below were the domed roofs of walled houses — thousands of them, angles and circles pushing out of antiquity. Not a tree nor shrub nor blade of grass, only baked mud and sand. Had the phalanxes of Sargon marched out of the gates, it would not have seemed incongruous.

I had understood that there was a British missionary stationed at Berjand. I had hoped to sleep that day at his establishment. But the holy man had abandoned his compound. For Berjand there was no God but God, and Mohammed was his Prophet.

I thought it a bit risky to sleep that midday. My driver would have a pipe of hashish and the encouragement of his cronies at the tea-house. He might drive on without me, let my luggage be pilfered, or ignite the tinder of fanaticism that is but lightly covered by the decreed pill-box caps that supplant the turban and skull cap in the Shah's realms.

I sat in the lorry, had some tea brought me and directed my crew to sleep, pointing to my watch and indicating the time, three o'clock, for departure to Dozdab. The Persians vanished into mud huts.

'You have a bad driver,' I heard a voice at the side of my lorry saying. 'You should have taken a Christian, an Armenian.'

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You can go to few remote places in Central Asia without having an Armenian drift into your ken. Excellent linguists, English is usually one of their languages.

'Did my man say anything about our trouble back on the road?' I inquired.

The Armenian was watching his boy unload rugs from the back of a donkey and spread them on the ground for my inspection.

'Your driver said that if he had not been made stupid by Allah, he would have killed you.'

'Allah Akbar! Allah is great!' I replied with more fervour than becomes a Christian.

'You should not give voice to an infidel prayer.' The Armenian was hurt. Armenians have paid for their creed too much in gold and blood to permit even casual tolerance of Islam.

'The dogs hate us,' he declared with a sweeping gesture that ended with his swarthy fists clenched on his chest — a gesture that made him an impregnable, shining island of true faith on a threatening infidel sea. 'They are jealous of our God because he is better. They hate us because we sell cheaper.'

'See these Baluches . . .' pointing to some outspread rugs. 'Fifteen tomans and you have a fine price. Don't buy from those Mohammedan dogs.'

It was an amusing sales talk, I thought. But it was the fanaticism of Asiatic outposts going far deeper than a trade appeal. At Dozdab I found it rife.

Dozdab, dropped on the deserts of Persia, is an isolated congregation of faiths and creeds sizzling on a

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sandy griddle. The mud houses and walls had recently been given a coat of whitewash to impress his Majesty Riza Khan, who that summer had paid a visit to his turbulent south-eastern outpost. So impressed was his Majesty by the neatness of the painted town that he changed its name from Dozdab, which means 'thieves' watering place', to Zaridan, or 'meeting place for the holy men', thereby causing a revision of postal indexes throughout the world and not at all affecting the natives, who continue to call it Dozdab.

It is on the route of the smugglers of arms, bound from the Gulf to their market in the mountains of Afghanistan, not a hundred miles away. But when I arrived there in July, this smuggling had ceased. It was too hot even for that lucrative business. It is a welter of intrigue. Stray tribesmen from Afghanistan, the border of which is just over the eastern horizon, wander into town to see what can be done in the way of buying a few rifles. Bearded Sikhs, their long hair coiled beneath huge turbans of purple and yellow and red, gather in textile shops and food stores to hatch plots with strong-featured Baluchis against Great Britain.

The burden of proof is on any stranger to show that he is not a spy of some sort. I felt like a crafty and sinister fellow when I learned that I was regarded by the Sikhs as a British Intelligence Officer and that the Persian mullahs (priests) had branded me as an agent of Moscow with designs upon the Prophet's faithful. The mullahs had heard that mosques in Soviet Samarkand had been converted into brothels.

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For a week I sat in this white hell invested by many gods. Faithful Brahmins and Buddhists, Mohammedans and Christians, Sikhs and a hundred members of lesser cults slept during the day's heat and stalked the bazaars at sundown. Their talk was a babel of many tongues. The sins of one sect were the virtues of another.

Christianity was represented by a young Englishman, two English women, and a doctor — an Indian Untouchable, with puffy features, soft eyes and suave speech, who played tennis with his sari-clad wife. These missionaries lived behind the chaste walls of the mission in quiet rooms that were a part of England — chill, cool and secure in their self-righteousness. They seemed thousands of miles from the flesh and passion and fury of the desert men and women milling in the bazaar a stone's throw away.

At evening prayer when the frail, virginal young English woman dropped her eyes behind her horn-rimmed spectacles and besought, 'Lord, help us with our work for your children', her prayers may have sped directly to the stars, which seem always so near to the earth here, but her tone seemed to say, 'God, you know they are not worth the effort'.

Nevertheless, she worked long, hot hours ministering to sick men and women, pulling teeth with clumsy pliers and assisting the Indian surgeon in delicate operations in a crude operating room, resting only when fever struck her.

I'd often leave the sinless freshness of the mission parlours to wander at night in the dusty streets and

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gossip with the Sikhs, who sold me beer, heavy with preservative, at a dollar a bottle. In lantern-lit shops they boasted of the bravery of their race and harked back two thousand years to tales of their conquest of India. They predicted that Gandhi would wreck the British Empire.

One night a child of eleven or twelve, in her nun-like garb, paused before a shop, dropped her veil aside, spoke in Persian to me as she forced the tired, sensuous smile of prostitution and bared her bony chest to show the faintest ripple of a dirty, immature breast.

I had understood that a Christian seen with a Moslem woman — even one of the streets — stood to be murdered. I commented on this to the shopkeeper.

'Yes,' he said, 'that is true. But if you want the girl, I'll tell her to go back in my shop and wait for you.'

Declining his offer, I thanked him and walked back to the mission hospital to make the night rounds of the sick with the Indian.

The doctor was at a barren table in his barren office reading the Bible by an oil lamp. I told him of the child prostitute.

The Untouchable, whose shadow in India falling across the food of any caste would cause it to be thrown away, had a flash of nationalism in him.

'Child prostitution in Persia is no worse than child marriage here,' he declared. 'You hear much of child marriage in my country and nothing of it in Persia. Yet of the two nations mine is the more humane.

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'The bride in India at her marriage is a child, say of six, seven, or eight, when she is married to a boy-husband officially,' he began explaining. 'After the wedding the bride goes to her parents' home and the boy leaves with his parents. Now the time comes within a few months that the child-bride is conducted to her boy-husband's home. She goes there. The boy has no connection with her in any way. He does not even talk to her privately. The bride is strictly under the discipline of the boy's mother. She sleeps with her and all the other wives, and the boy sleeps in a different apartment. This continues until the girl reaches puberty, at which time the boy is entitled to take his wife as such.

'But in Persia it is different. Here the girl-wives that come under my observation are a pathetic picture. Their husbands consult me and request me to operate so that complete marital relationship may be had. The mere sight of the husband is often enough to throw the poor little wife into a fit of hysteria. She cries and shrinks in his presence. This fear upsets the nervous system of the child.

'It is a wicked country — a wicked country,' he repeated tersely. 'Sin is in their blood.'

Not the scientist but the mystic was talking.

'When I was studying medicine I believed that salvarsan was a blessing to mankind. I have found it a curse,' he went on.

My incredulous 'Why?' set his eyes ablaze.

'Why?' he answered. 'Ninety per cent of these people are syphilitic. They come to me for treatment.

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I give them injections and preach to them. And what do they do? With the disease arrested, they go out and sin more.'

He apparently preferred to have the natives rot without interruption if it would save them from further sin. Yet he, like the girl, despising his charges for their indifference to his faith, worked diligently with delicate skill, operating on the heathen, alternating scientific treatment with admonitions and hymns.

With a flashlight we picked our way along the canopied mud veranda, lining the two sides of the hospital compound. Though all the patients were very ill, there were no moans. For most of them were hill men from Baluchistan and Afghanistan, where stoicism is inbred. They were sprawled on ropestrung beds, their families and friends squatting and sleeping around them in the darkness.

The eyes of most of the patients were bandaged. For the bulk of the doctor's surgical work was on the eyes. The glaring sun, the sand and the filth add blindness to the other curses of the harsh territory. Trachoma is ever rampant and cataracts are strangely prevalent.

But the swarthy doctor, more concerned with the soul of his charges than their physical ailments, said, 'It is better that they see Christ than the sun.'

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CHAPTER VII

It was a five-hour drive from Dozdab to the border of Baluchistan. Mirzawa was the border town, a score of clay-baked houses. As we turned towards it, the sun came up, and with it the heat — beginning a three-week period of most intense hot weather.

My Sikh driver and his son, who acted as mechanic, took off their turbans and their shirts and dropped their waist-long hair down their backs. Their tribes believe it a sin to cut hair, and so their beards hang down to their bellies. The windshield on the car was smashed. As we faced the hot wind that blew down the valley, their hair blew out behind and their beards parted.

At a forsaken desert settlement I had to make a decision — whether to go by rail to Peshawar and then to Kabul or make it overland. I was weak. My fever was up when I stepped out of the lorry to the door of the Consular resthouse that had been opened for my occupancy.

It was a mud hut, barren of furniture, with a fireplace of mud at one end of the room. Two low windows overlooked the desert and the mountains to the north; I could scarcely wait for my bed to be set up.

The day grew hotter and hotter. I lay naked, perspiring in a sleepless stupor, conscious only of dysentery pains and insect bites. I was unable to go on or go back.

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A Hindu in charge of the British outpost supervised my man-servant, watched that he boiled my water, saw that my cups were sterilized. He prescribed quinine and barley water. I had plenty of quinine but substituted tea for the barley water.

For three days I grew weaker. Although my immediate interests were concerned with achieving a comfortable position on my scratching canvas bed, I doggedly maintained a sickly interest in the hills of Afghanistan that hung always on the horizon beyond my windows.

I no longer counted the days, but waited only for the sun to drop and the desert to chill. Four o'clock would see the thermometer at 115° to 120° in the shade. By two a.m. it would be seventy. Those few cool hours made a new world out of a purgatory.

I had no one to talk to besides the Hindu officer. He would often come at tea time and tell me that I was not ill, and relate stories of his native Serat. Sickness did not exist in his scheme, where life falls before disease like rain before a wind. One was not, to the Hindu, ill until one was dead.

He illustrated with stories of plague.

'My uncles and my three brothers — at noon they talk to me — at sundown they are gone. Just a pain here . . .' he pointed to his groin and doubled up his body '. . . and that is all. You will be all right. Everybody here is as you are.'

And so he would leave me, to console myself that at least I was not in swampy, steaming Serat where Black Death was singing down the streets.

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In a few days I was up and around the village.

When I felt better, I began seriously to consider going to Bombay by the shortest route. I had until the eve of a certain day to decide, a day on which I received some strange visitors.

My guests were due at tea time. I saw them coming across a mile waste of sand from the Hindu's compound. The guest of honour was to be a Baluch chieftain.

Baluchistan is a British province which was once a part of Afghanistan. The tribesmen of the country are noted for their marksmanship, courage, and stoical indifference to physical suffering. They are hereditary bandits. Great Britain has ceased to fight them. She finds that it is cheaper both in life and pounds to pay subsidies semi-annually to the fearless chiefs rather than suffer their daring raids on villages and caravans. It is my guess that the Baluch chieftain and his aides who were moving towards my hut were in the village to collect payment for their law-abiding ways.

As they came along, the chief was easily recognizable in the group of the four men. He was of medium height. His teeth and white eyeballs glistened in the light as he grinned to the officer of the British Empire. His dirty turban was loosely wrapped. One end of it encircled his neck and hung down his back. Over his shoulder was thrown a felt cape that sufficed for prayer rug and bed. His shoes of sheep's hide were pointed at heel and toe, and he swung his muscular legs beneath the coarse, cotton trousers that swathed them. In a tireless stride he flourished his rifle in his hand. On a

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chain around his neck was an unsheathed dagger. His two aides, younger by twenty years, were his counterparts.

As they entered the low-roofed hut, they filled the room. Placing long, hard right hands on their hearts, they bowed, saying 'Salaam, salaam', and straightened up to grin amiably.

They had removed their shoes at the door, and the skin of their bare feet was tough as leather. There were no chairs, and at my nod they all sat on the floor. I squatted with them. My boy served tea. My bed was used to hold the tray.

The Indian interpreted for us. The chief said, 'I have never seen an American. It is a great honour.'

I said, 'To meet a Baluch chieftain is a greater honour.'

When this was interpreted, each one of the tribesmen flashed a look that had in it all the mannerliness of any social scheme.

They wanted to know about America. I had two or three magazines in my brief-case. In an advertisement in one of them was a snapshot of the skyline of lower New York. They passed it around.

'Have you no mountains and plains in your country?' asked the chief, sweeping his large hand toward the desert rimmed by hills.

When my answer was interpreted, the three hillmen adjusted their rifles so they could gather closer over the book. They smiled again as they looked at the skyscrapers and chattered among themselves. Their chief, looking at me as he spoke in his native tongue, con-

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veyed by his expression that he was asking me a very difficult question.

'Why,' he asked, 'if you have much land, do you live in such tall houses?'

They stayed but half an hour, then gathered their guns, holding them like walking sticks, salaamed, stepped easily into their shoes on the doorstep and were gone.

A few hours later at sunset I was walking around my hut to gain a little strength. As I came to the east side of it, I saw three figures far out on the sand, the last bit of daylight flashing on the barrels of their muskets. The notion of Karachi and Bombay vanished. I decided to see what was beyond the hills that made New York skyscrapers only interesting and mildly amusing.

Service had been cancelled on the western end of the line between Dozdab and Quetta. The western rail-head was Nok Kundi — a village about one hundred miles east of the Persian border. A train ran once a week to this point and returned to Quetta. From Nok Kundi to Quetta was a twenty-two hour journey over sandy wastes.

When I reached the rail-head about nine in the morning, I had a ten hours' wait before the train departed on its day's trundle to the capital of Baluchistan.

There was a single first class coach of the Indian type on the five-car train. I had a large compartment, with four beds, a table and a long cane chair, to myself. Four ordinary electric fans were distributed, one on

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each side of the compartment. In the centre of the ceiling was suspended a huge, four-bladed fan that clicked as it spun. I set them all going at full speed.

I dropped the wooden blinds and darkened the compartment. Despite these conveniences, the likes of which I had not seen for many weeks, it was a day of heat that I shall never forget. That particular stretch is rated as one of the two hottest places in the world.

I was there in late July. The minutes crept, exhausted by the sunlight. It seemed a week before the station bell rang. Whistles were blown in the confusion and chatter that preceded departing time.

As if brought out of the wastes by some devilish magician, hundreds of brown people scurried back and forth in the sand by the train side. There were strong-faced Baluch tribesmen sprinkled through the Hindu crowds. The stationmaster, in a collarless dress shirt, the tail dropping to his knees over his baggy cotton trousers, came pushing through the crowd shouting orders to unseen subordinates, as though he were issuing them generally to every member of the crowd, hoping they would be taken up and executed by someone.

Suddenly over the rock-strewn sand galloped half a dozen camels. Something unusual was happening. But I was too tired and hot to watch it. I dropped the blind, lay down and fell asleep. Though I had arrived exhausted, I had been unable even to doze during the hot, listless afternoon. Now, with action and excitement outside, I slept soundly. When I awoke the train was moving, the blinds were up, the humming fans

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were blowing cool air over me, the wastes outside were black. Two yellow light-bulbs glowed weakly at one end of the compartment.

Stretched out in a chair, leisurely eating a plate of curry and rice, was a skeleton-like Hindu, immaculately dressed in a suit of white silk. Without looking at me, he spoke — with a marked English accent.

'Perfectly rotten day — what?'

I grunted, drank some water from my jug, and rolled back on the bed. There was a long silence. He snapped on more lights, fumbled in a huge Gladstone bag that lay open on the opposite bed, pulled out an old Persian manuscript and began to read.

Another hour passed.

'You haven't dined?' he asked.

I shook my head.

After a long interval he spoke again. 'I had my bearer pile your luggage there,' he said, nodding toward a space beneath the bed.

'Thanks,' I said. I undressed, put on pyjamas.

The train stopped. He opened the door, called to his bearer, gave a direction in Hindustani. In a few minutes the boy returned, setting two bottles on the floor of the compartment.

'Soda peg?' he questioned, as he reached into his bag and uncorked a bottle of whisky.

'No,' I answered.

I fell asleep, leaving the cadaverous-faced Hindu sipping his drink and turning the pages of his ancient Persian book.

I do not know whether he slept that night or not.

For when I woke with the first heat of the day, he was still reading, his empty glass on the arm of his chair.

As I pulled out my handbag from beneath the seat, he asked, 'Parlez vous français?'

'No.'

'Sprechen Sie Deutsch?'

'No, English only.'

'Sorry: I did not understand.' He smiled. He was irresistible, and I felt ashamed.

A bath, a cup of tea and the knowledge that by nightfall I would be in a British hotel in Quetta enlivened me. And the day, despite the heat, went rapidly. We drank whisky and soda, while my companion, who was a professor in an Indian university, told yarns of his summer amid the archives of old Persian literature in Teheran.

He explained the excitement which had put me to sleep. To catch this train, he had abandoned his car some twenty kilometres from Nok Kundi when the breakdown proved too serious for immediate repairs. He had driven that distance full-speed on camel in an hour and a quarter.

As we were drawing nearer to Quetta, I said, 'I cannot explain my ugly temper of last night. As you see, I am really a gregarious being. For six weeks I have had no one with whom to talk. I missed it, I thought. But when I woke and saw you in the compartment, I was definitely irritated'.

He replied, 'I knew it was one of two things. Either you did not understand English or you were "fed up".'

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And he related stories of queer things the heat of Baluchistan did to those who stayed too long in it.

Suddenly the train was at the station. Away from it ran the tree-lined road to Quetta — the first trees I had seen for months. I slipped on my sun-glasses and stepped on to the glaring gravel platform. I was the only European or American on the train. The station official met me and invited me into the office for a cup of tea.

The strict watch which Britain keeps upon her turbulent hinterlands was at once evident. A local official awaited me in the railway office. Although I had a *visé* giving me the right to go through Baluchistan, he asked me a long list of personal questions concerning my route from Teheran, the length of time I had stopped at various points, why I was going to Afghanistan, how long I expected to stay there.

These interrogations and many more — all given in a friendly, casual way — took up the better part of an hour. I was anxious to get to a civilized apartment and a bath. They summoned a tonga, supervised the loading of my luggage; and I bounced down the drive-way in a two-wheeled cart, crossed a wide, asphalt road, entered a gate to a park-flanked lane.

It was Quetta's dak bungalow.

Here the rooms of the single, long-storied structures open upon verandas that run the full length of the building. My room was large and low-ceilinged. At the wide door hung a cool *hasir*. The bed was canopied in a vast tent of snowy white net, the floor strewn with

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Baluch rugs. There was a roomy desk in one corner, and a dressing table with mirrors, swooping cane chairs and a vase of flowers.

The second room, a bath and dressing room, was almost as large as the first. Scrawny Hindu men were already pouring water into the galvanized bath that sat in the middle of the floor, and filling a tank that served the shower. For already while I was detained at the station a room was being made ready.

I ordered some soda-water, took a bath, and before I had a chance to pour a drink and sit down to rest in the cool apartment, the veranda in front of my door was well-peopled with serving men — bearers — in search of work. As soon as I appeared, they started to talk in broken English.

'Sahib will have good bearer? I good bearer.'

I stepped on to the veranda into a simultaneous proffering of credentials. Each man carried from three to twenty dirty, worn envelopes in which were enclosed testimonials of their competency which they had wheedled from prior employers. The men all looked alike and grinned alike, exposing a great circle of blackened teeth.

One said, 'I work for American. You take me'.

I looked at some of his letters.

'American letter.' He pointed as I ran through the pack. The letters I had read were all from Englishmen and were couched in almost identical phrases. 'The bearer is a good boy, honest and willing to work, but must be watched carefully.'

The American's letter was a full long paragraph of

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unqualified praise, stating among other things that the boy could cook, was clean and always boiled the water.

'Where is the American Sahib now?' I asked.

'Not here any more,' replied the bearer. 'He drink bad water. He dead.'

There were a few pleasant days in Quetta, marred only by banking difficulties. Then I took the branch railway to Chaman, a three-hour journey by rail to the outpost of the British army near the Afghan border.

The British have laid a railroad from Quetta northward to Chaman. It is a well-ballasted right of way. Suddenly it comes upon a cathedral-like structure — two grey towers built on the side of a barren, golden mountain. Here the Indian engineer turns high priest, rings the bell ceremoniously, toots the whistle twice, and with the smoke from the locomotive funnel genuflexing at the stone portal, the train at a respectful speed enters this mountain cathedral to pass through a two-mile tunnel.

Emerging from the tunnel, the train skirts the mountain sides, coming out of a several-mile curve just across a narrow valley from the point it entered this swirl. It is an impressive piece of engineering worked out in mid-Asia that the British military might always be well-equipped to meet the continuing threat of Afghanistan. The largest military outpost of the British Empire is stationed at Quetta with regiments strewn along this road and garrisoned at Chaman, the terminus, a few miles from the Afghan border.

At Chaman the officer in command of the camp

advised me not to enter Afghanistan by the southern route.

'If you *must* go in, go by rail around Peshawar and from there through Khyber Pass to Kabul. There are disturbances in the south, and we permit no British subjects to enter this route under any circumstances. Two men who crossed the border without authority early this spring have not been heard from.'

But it has been written that 'three things there are that set men astir, a locked casket, an inscrutable woman and a road that pierceth the unknown'. Besides, I had gone too far now to turn back.

I made arrangements for a car to carry me to Kandahar, where I would present to the Governor of Kandahar my letter from the Afghan Ambassador to Persia.

By sunset I had bargained for my car with an Afghan trading company. It was to come at dawn and call for me.

I was still ill. I did not have much heart to go on or go back and certainly none to stay in the filthy hole I was in. I walked from the trading company to the bazaar to shop for canned goods to add to the supply I had bought in Quetta. I found nothing.

The roads were thick with dust that filled my *ghivas*. I had fallen in Quetta and cut my leg. I bumped it against a cart, opened the wound and began fretting about infection.

I returned to my bungalow as it was getting dark, lit the lamp and bathed my leg with a disinfectant. There was no net over my bed. I pulled down the lamp

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and read until the insects swarmed too thickly, then blew out the light and went into the courtyard.

The sky was overcast, and the night so black it obliterated the trees and the compound wall. There was no sight nor sound. When the donkey tied near the pool pawed the hard earth, it sounded like the dull boom of a distant gun. In the silence, the vindictive mosquitoes passing my ears had the sing of a buzz-saw going through a knot.

It was a melancholy prelude to an adventure I had travelled so far to seek. I don't know how professional daredevils feel on the threshold of their goal, but my vicarious living in the dark compound was not made up of conjectures of the morrow. I distinctly recall thinking that I wished the darkness were made by drawn blinds and that I could snap them up and look out on the electric sign at home flashing in gigantic, golden letters.

I thought I would get sleepy staring into the night, but I did not. I devised and rejected devices for getting an interpreter smuggled over the border and concluded that I would have to go without one.

I went in, lit the light, put on a fresh suit of shorts, snapped shut all my luggage, blew out the lamp, and lay down on the bed. It was probably two o'clock. The air smelled as if it was going to rain, and feeble heat-lightning flashed. I slept restlessly.

I heard a motor pull up and stop outside the gate. It was still pitch dark. Then the creak of the gate opening. Foreign words cried out in a deep voice that seemed to respect the stillness. There was some chatter,

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and a motley group, led by a half-naked Hindu carrying a lantern, were standing by my bedside.

A tall, hawk-featured, turbanned man without ado pointed to my equipment. I assumed correctly that it was my driver. The Hindus folded my bed, picked up my stuff, and all of us, following the lantern, marched over the courtyard and through the gate in silence.

They threw my luggage into my car, the lights of which shooting off on to the desert raised my spirits. I climbed in. We drove about a mile to a warehouse, where we stayed until dawn broke. With its coming the clouds ran away, and the cool, grey air took on a soft energy. I felt easy and ready to go ahead with the day.

The sun came up and the heat with it when we wheeled out on to the British military road to the north. My Afghan driver kept his eyes on the road and said nothing, accepting the cigarettes I offered him without even a nod of thanks.

Near the top of a rise in the land ahead I saw the excellent highway vanish into a narrow, rocky trail. At the top of the hill was a hut of skin and reeds. As we sped toward it, turbanned men squatting on a smear of dirty felt stood out, their rifles laid across their laps. Golden mountains fringed the rocky plateau, and a bright blue sky touched their tops.

Suddenly the driver, a cigarette between his fingers, lifted a hand from the wheel, swept it toward the jagged horizon and cried, 'Afghanistan! Afghanistan!'

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CHAPTER VIII

My cigarettes, I had realized by now, made a fair substitute for Esperanto in this remote corner of the world.

I had fifty tins of Gold Flakes, with fifty cigarettes in each — hard-rolled, compact cigarettes of Virginia tobacco made in England and strewn broadcast over the world.

As we came to the Afghan border, I was tearing away the paper wrapped around one of the cylindrical tins.

Out of a hut of skin and reeds poured a troop of Afghan warriors. I thought they might be the Immigration authorities. They crowded around the lorry and talked to my driver, but no one said, 'Passport, passport'.

My driver solemnly motioned a request to let them ride. I nodded assent.

The whole bunch of them made a rush for the back end of the motor, unslung their guns, and a score of them crowded in. I watched them finally seated, squatting in all directions — a lush garden of rifle barrels and turbans. I did not realize they were the guard conveying me to Kandahar.

They were hawk-featured fellows with regular, white teeth. I wondered whether advertisers were not missing an opportunity, for though none of these

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fellows had ever seen a toothbrush, any one of them could have served for a toothpaste advertisement.

I opened my tin of cigarettes, and pulled the cardboard flange that effected a sort of levitation of the centre fags. I offered one to my driver and gestured that he pass them back to the troops. He shook his head, laughed and made a motion that indicated an explosion. I offered the tin to the first man behind me. I never saw it again. As the motor started, we made our way into Afghanistan. The rear of the lorry was as thick with smoke as a ship's cabin at three o'clock in the morning with a card game on.

Here I was, then, in a country where I had been informed by a man once attaché of a legation in its capital, my chances of getting through without being kidnapped or robbed, possibly wounded as an incident, were about three out of ten. There were seven chimerical chances against me as we thumped over the sunlit plateau.

There was little vegetation. Desert brush, rocks and occasional patches of dry grass covered the sandy clay. For many miles there was no hut nor sign of life. The road, though narrow, was relatively smooth. Once we passed a caravan of donkeys, each animal saddled with two long baskets heaped with grapes and peaches; later we passed a motor lorry laden with fruit and melons.

We wound into the hills. The wall of a town blocked the way. A narrow, oval gate, barely wide enough for the lorry, was the only entrance. Above it on the hill crest rose a vast, turreted fortress, partly in ruins

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but most of it in good repair — one of the most picturesque battlements I had ever seen. The angular bastions and towers looped around the precipice with a hulking, cylindrical garrison at the prow of the hill, from which the walls, like great clay wings, emerged at right angles.

The several streets of the village converged crazily into an hexagonal opening that swarmed with men. At least every other one carried a gun slung over his back, and the front of his cotton tunic bore a glistening cartridge belt.

My driver motioned that I get out of the vehicle and follow him. He was so insistent that, although reluctant, I obeyed. We walked through a labyrinth of narrow passageways, passed through a couple of squalid courtyards and entered the low doorway of a mud house, the crowd behind us filling up the court-yard.

The rooms had four rope beds and some carpets on the clay floor, upon which half a dozen Afghans sat. At the side of the room, like a flamboyant shrine, was stacked a gay array of fruit. I sat down on the floor with the others.

Tea and fruit were served. Melons, grapes, peaches and pomegranates were laid before me. I was handed a long, home-made dirk, with a sheep-bone handle to cut my fruit. A burly tribesman, his chest glistening with cartridges, rose from his place across the room, came over, fingered the melon that had been put before me and started to mutter what sounded to me like profanity. The servant brought him several

melons. He felt all of them, chose one, cut it in half with a single swing of his knife, viewed the two halves with a critical eye, then placed them before me, smiling as though to say, 'There, that's not a bad Afghan melon. Try it'.

'Passport, passport', said a young Afghan in the circle of tea-drinking natives. His hair was cut short and sleeked back with oil. I merely thought he was trying one of those few international words that make a link between people who have no speech in common. Many a time on train journeys I have exchanged passports with fellow-travellers with whom I was unable to talk. Makes for some sort of communication, and passes the time more interestingly than casual talk.

So I handed him my passport. He took it into another room and in a few minutes returned it to me with purple ink scratched in flower-like arrangement on a fresh page.

Afghanistan did not seem so bad. Countries reputed more civilized have no such gracious immigration service; for when he handed me back my passport I was aware for the first time that I was in the Afghans' Ellis Island.

The lorry jolted on over a parched river bed, growled up the embankment and headed across the valley. Far ahead, like an oblong of chalk, were the walls of Kandahar, its bastions glittering in the afternoon sun.

Kandahar — city of merchants and warriors. Jenghiz Khan paused here in his sweep across Asia to

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kill and pillage. Lord Roberts, with a sick and wounded fragment of his brave band, stormed the tall bulwarks and became a hero of British imperialism — Roberts of Kandahar. Into its gates spongy-hoofed camels had for ages carried soft silks, shimmering metals, tea, perfumes and spices from India. And out of its gates the caravans had returned with bulging bundles of camel hair, dried fruits, the most luscious in the world, wool cut from the shaggy backs of fat-tailed sheep, tobacco, and poppy seeds for opium.

As the walls drew nearer the fatigue of my journey vanished.

Here was a town untouched by the western world. No European concessions marked asphalt splotches on the clay highways. No godly churchmen from Europe or America maintained compounds to save the infidel. Its four main sections, marked by two straight highways across the town east to west and north to south, are inhabited by four strong Afghan tribes.

We trundled down the street. Donkeys and camels leisurely ambled to one side to let us pass. London and New York have their especial marts for automobiles, garments and money. So, too, the bazaars of Kandahar are divided into separate groups. For many yards the highway was lined with weapon shops. Bone-handled knives and stubby sheaths of sheepskin flanked short swords. There were Russian rifles with birch stocks, and crude pieces fabricated from the parts of damaged weapons. (The Afghan, it is said, can take a piece of gaspipe, a log and a knife, and make a rifle with which he can shoot an ear off his

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enemy.) There were powder and cartridges from Czechoslovakia, smuggled into the forbidden land.

In winter Kandahar is cool. The autumn and the spring are comfortable. But in summer there, Asia's sun is ruthless. The thermometer I carried, ever hopeful that it would register a temperature that might make me believe my smothering feeling was an obsession, registered 109°.

But Kandahar, lest legends be violated, holds a sacred obligation to be hot beyond endurance in August.

The story goes that a beggar, Fareed, immortal to Kandaharians, came that way and asked for bread. So busy were the natives with trade and war and love that they paid no attention to his entreaties. Defeated and hungry, he threw himself into the river to finish with a world so wrapped in its own selfishness. But an ancient god, older than Jehovah or Buddha, saw his hopeless plunge. Instead of drowning, the beggar came to the surface bearing a fish. That he might be fed in style, the sun blazed brightly to fry the fish for him, and the thoughtless townspeople roasted. So Kandahar must always be hot in August.

I had come without interpreters. The driver had been directed in Chaman to take me to the governor. The governor, who was away falconing in Khelat-a-Khelat, would not be there until later. I was three weeks behind my time-table, but my arrival was still expected.

Afghan hospitality is real. It has dignity and sincerity. An official reception seemed warranted on the

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basis of my letters. My arrival had been announced to the town by the grape-vine intelligence service of the bazaar. Crowds gathered so thick to see an American that the lorry had to stop.

At one of these halts I was trying to open a film enclosed in a tropical pack. I was digging at it with my finger nail.

Men on horses dotted the crowd. A pace or two back from the car was a black-bearded warrior, his turban white as snow. Around his neck on a steel chain hung his dagger. He pushed his horse through the crowd, took off the dirk and handed it to me. The look in his eyes reflected the Afghan proverb, 'If you give only an onion, give it graciously'.

I opened the film pack, handed him back his knife with, 'thank you'.

His nod of acceptance had in it the polished casualness of a prime minister directing a visiting diplomat to precede him through the door.

We pushed on through the streets flaming with gay cotton fabrics, draped fold on fold in the bazaars, and turned down a walled street, to be stopped by three soldiers at attention.

Here I was summarily unloaded, and directed over a courtyard of packed mud to enter a room without furniture. Rugs with reds and greens and blues soft as pastels covered the floor. A banner with the Mosque and the Wreath of Afghanistan hung at the end of the room.

At the entrance we removed our shoes. I was motioned to a seat on the floor beneath the banner. A

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score of Afghans took their places along the wall, also sitting on the floor.

Tea was served in the Afghan fashion. Green tea is poured into a small cup with a saucer. Sugar, cracked with a hammer from the ever-present blue cones of it such as hang in all provision shops, is put into the cups so that when dissolved it fills about one third of the space. A tiny spoon is part of the service.

The chief of police and the mayor made their entrance after tea. Though there was no interpreter, I was to recognize by the tone of their voices that they were saying their long, formal greetings. As the mayor introduced the members of the group, each man put his right hand over his heart to say, 'Salaam, salaam'.

An officer came to the door, made a short speech, and we all rose. I expected to go back to my car to be taken I knew not where. But my car had vanished, and in its place was a Buick sedan. I was directed into it and sat on the left side. That caused considerable commotion. They pointed to the right side. I was, I gathered, a guest of honour. The mayor and the chief of police followed me.

We drove down the street to a walled enclosure. The car crossed a drawbridge through a gate into a courtyard and stopped before another wall. The gates in this wall swung open. We marched into the compound. A fountain bubbled in the centre of the garden. Terraces were stepped up to the entrance of the palace — for palace it was. I had been brought to the king's own southern residence.

In the drawing-room, carpet spread upon carpet

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covered the vast floor, each so soft in design and colour that they might have been paintings. Here there was no sitting on the floor. Beneath ceilings studded with intricately carved wood pegs, distinctly Afghan decoration, was strewn European furniture. Its selection had been guided by an Afghan's notion of the West. There were circular chairs with arms so high they stood level with one's ears, divans that seemed limitless in their expanse of rugs. I understood an army officer to say, 'Shah Abbas', as I touched a priceless piece of weaving.

We stood around talking and laughing and not understanding a word that the other spoke.

Suddenly there was a crescendo in the talk. At the door stood a bearded man in a blue serge suit and a white turban, the intense glistening of his one eye making up for the lack of the other, which was only a withered socket.

'Salaam, salaam, salaam,' he said, his right hand on his heart and his body bobbing from the waist like the float on a line when the fish has the bait. 'We welcome you, Herr James, to Afghanistan.' He continued, his English sprinkled with a bit of German, 'the Governor has asked me to say that he is very sad that he cannot be here to welcome you to our country.'

Here, then, was my interpreter, Mohammed. He went to work immediately. Phrase by phrase, word by word, he brought me the greetings of some thirty guests who had by that time assembled. Each greeting varied but little from the other.

Said the mayor, 'We thank you for coming to Afghanistan. It is an honour to our country.'

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And then greeting followed greeting.

'May you not be weary and may the sun not be too hot and may you find our country to your liking.'

'May there be no trouble ahead for you. May the troubles behind you be forgotten.'

'May your family be good. May your wife be beautiful and your children rich.'

'Afghanistan is a poor country. You have had trouble, but your trouble will be made up in our friendship.'

I replied, 'I have found the Afghan people excellent. Your men are brave and generous. You are kind to strangers, and my comfort has been great because of your good nature. May it never be less.'

'May your rest be good. May your sleep be with fine dreams. May your journey be fine.'

'My rest is good because the Afghan moon is bright and my journey is fine because Afghanistan is a great country.'

'We thank you for coming to our country. We thank you for saying it is good.'

'Do not thank me for coming, but I thank you for your hospitality.'

'Our king works hard to make our country great. We hope our country is to your liking, and we thank you for coming to us.'

'I am not to be thanked. Let the thanks go to his Majesty and to you, his Majesty's officers, who are making your nation good.'

And so on and on for an hour.

A table was set on the terrace, and dinner was

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served in the garden. On the exquisite linen cloth was a centrepiece of pyramided fruits: melons, many varieties of them, grey and green and yellow; grapes, large as plums; peaches, golden and red, and pomegranates.

Kandahar is the orchard of central Asia. Merchants and farmers of the valley grow rich producing for the dried-fruit markets of India. And most of the fresh fruit obtainable in a thousand-mile radius comes from this fertile oasis. On the table was a selection fit for a connoisseur.

The guests at dinner were army officers, city and state officials and three tribal chieftains. All but the chieftains were dressed in European clothes, and all wore turbans except the army officers who kept their hats on throughout the meal.

We filed out to dinner. At each corner of the terrace stood a Kandahar policeman in his red uniform, twirling a red club. There were innumerable servants, in white turbans and pantaloons.

First, hot dishes were served—rice with mutton and green peppers and a watery sauce, seasoned with strange spices. It was not so hot as the curry of India nor so mild as Milan sauce. (Kandahar had been a spice mart before Marco Polo brought back his trade gazetteer to the feudal lords of Europe who were eating their meat plain and relishing its decay.) But all the epicurean condiments, though chosen from sacred bins, could not down the stench of boiled mutton. For mutton in all shapes and forms was the base of the main dishes. Next came eggplant fried

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in grease from the tail of a fat-tailed sheep; over it was poured an opaque sour cream made of goat's milk.

Although knives and forks were at all plates, only the interpreter and one government official used them. The others helped themselves to sheets of thin, unleavened bread about a yard long and a foot wide. They tore great fragments from it, dipped both hands and bread into the stews, and pushed fistfuls of bread, rice, meat and gravy into their mouths with no small damage to the white tablecloth.

I stood in the main drawing-room of the palace and looked out on the garden through the very tall french windows that reached from floor to ceiling of the high room.

'Perhaps the night will be cool?' I asked my interpreter.

'Cool, so sleep comes,' he replied.

'I have been sleeping out of doors most of the journey,' I said, making conversation that was difficult.

He spoke to one of the officers, and turned again to tell me more about Kandahar. Within a few minutes servants were lugging and unfolding one of the largest rugs I had ever seen, and spreading it on a stone terrace below the window. Others followed with parts of a gaunt, brass bed. They set it up, made it and erected a net over it. Others were carting in a dressing table and mirror, then I saw them lugging out my typewriter and a small table and the personal effects I had unpacked in my bedroom.

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When it was all done, the little Afghan's one eye twinkled: Putting out an eye or cutting off a hand is common punishment for trivial offences.

'In Afghanistan also,' he said, 'you can sleep under the stars.'

Mohammed remained after the guests took leave, fabulous in words of compliment.

'You will sleep under the sky,' repeated Mohammed. It was a brilliant sky. Bright stars canopied the severe white walls. Mohammed talked, burying his cigarette in his beard.

'Americans are very rich?' he questioned. 'And immoral?'

'Neither, we've had hard times and we are, I believe, most moral.'

'But I have seen,' he argued, 'in the days when Amanullah let us have foreign magazines, pictures of your bathing beaches and motion-picture factories. They are very bad. Your women are everywhere. They wear no veils, and, if you will pardon me, they sometimes wear no clothes. Is that not immoral?'

'Is morality based upon garments?'

'You are a philosopher.' He grinned.

'You flatter me. I am a realist.'

'If you are a realist, you see there is sin in your life.'

'Why,' I asked, 'do your women wear veils? Does it mean they are more pure?'

Mohammed spat into the fountain the seeds of the grape he was eating. His whiskers bristled, and his eye bored through the star-lit air.

'You are a Christian,' he said, as if tempering his

anger with all the tolerance he could bring to bear. 'Your women are for every man. Ours are for but one. How can you stop adultery when women go unclothed in the streets?'

'How do *you*?' I questioned. This was oriental argument.

'They dare not be unfaithful here,' he said. 'Nor can a man. I will tell you about a member of a friend's family. She was unfaithful to her husband. Her lover was a Hindu money-changer. What do we do here when such a thing goes on?

'If any Afghan finds a man and a woman being unfaithful to their marriage vows, then that man who sees them must kill them both where they are. If the observer fails to do this, and another man comes and sees the unfaithful people and the man who has not avenged it, that man must kill all three. And if it is proved that a man and a woman have done wrong, the law of the Prophet says they must be punished. We stone them. The man is thrown into the market place, and passers-by throw stones at him until he is dead. And the woman is put into a sack and thrown into the market place, where she, too, may be stoned.'

'Why the sack?' I interrupted.

'We must not look on the face of a woman in life or in death.'

'You are a man who reads many languages,' I said. 'You have declared that you are humane. What do you do when you see such a thing? It's very cruel. Do you watch, or do you throw stones yourself?'

'I am progressive,' he answered. 'I get a large

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rock. Then I drop it quickly on their heads. That is not so painful as dying by small stones.'

'Did you do that to the man in your story?'

'Not to him,' he replied. 'I threw small stones at him. But his wife — I dropped a big rock on her head.'

He waddled across the courtyard. A red-clad policeman let him out of the gate. The lights in the palace window were dimmed and in the centre of the garden was a white arc light that spread a ghostly glow over the flowers and the quiet pool.

I rose from my chair and walked toward my bed. Ten servants jumped to attention from the nooks in which they had been squatting. As I undressed, two of them took each garment as I removed it.

The night was a cool benediction after the roasting day. I slept.

Before dawn I awoke. Lanterns burned at the far end of the terrace. The stillness seemed eternal. As I fell back into sleep, the first feeble light of dawn pushed over the walls to bring in its wake the fiery day, for king and for vagabonding commoner alike.

When I got out of bed, the servants, at least a dozen of them by now, sprang up. They came to be a nuisance, ever squatting around the room or garden, wherever I went. Whenever I rose from my chair, they would all leap to attention, and whenever I sat down, they would all squat.

Because I am restlessly inclined to jump up and pace the floor, these fellows bobbing up and down emphasized my nervous distress. I stood it for a day or so, and then motioned to all of them to come with

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me. I walked out into the corridor, and they trailed along. I lined them up against the wall, and squatted at the head of the line, they all squatted, and then I sprang up quickly with both hands spread in the gesture of an orchestra conductor subduing the beats of the tympani. I held them in their places and sneaked away from them sideways, motioning that they remain down. Then I went back to my room and enjoyed wandering about alone in it.

In the afternoon I was led to a basement bedroom for my nap. It was a great, oval-ceilinged room of stone, perhaps twenty feet high and covered with so many coats of whitewash it gave the impression of plaster. At one end of it at the ceiling's edge was a row of small, pointed windows that looked out level with the ground. Here the light that came in seemed stripped of its heat; and the place, despite its dampness, was a chaste, cool sanctuary from the midday sun.

My bathroom was up a narrow, vaulted, stone stairway that spiralled to a top floor. A candle carried up it at night cast shadows in which lurked the wraiths of feudalism. Its oppressive, claustrophobic arches I had seen before in dank Boyars' castles in Moscow and on the Continent.

I used to think of the kings, now polished off by intrigues hatched in these very halls, who unbuttoned their richly bemedalled coats and went up these stairs in a hurry, racked with the plebeian pains of dysentery.

The water-closet was the Mohammedan type, a narrow, oblong hole cut in a marble floor, with two

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marble foot-rests on each side of it. The only other appointment of a true Islamic toilet is a vessel of water. On this point, however, a concession had been made in my favour. The brass-snouted pot had been removed, and in its place was set a marble box heaped with broken, jagged lumps of hard clay.

The governor, who had now returned from Khelat, received me in his palace drawing-room. He was a young man, brisk, efficient, and his colleagues boasted, as they would of a rare genius, that he was honest.

He assured me safe conduct to Kabul.

'His Majesty has made the roads safe. There is no danger.' And in the next breath, 'And if I do not learn of your safe arrival at Khelat within three days, I shall be happy to send my men after you.'

I left him sitting alone in his vast, ornate drawing-room, stroking his sharp-pointed beard.

While I was bidding good-bye, my bags were carried to the gate of the palace in which I had been living. I arrived outside the wall, to find the car surrounded by townsmen. It was a Ford touring car of a 1920 model. The flapping fenders dropped over patched tyres. The spare tyre was strung on behind with a piece of shaggy rope and had a blow-out in it the size of one's fist.

I was alarmed, but felt I could hardly complain to my hosts before giving it a trial. I motioned to the driver to start the motor. He bounded from his seat, lifted the hood, twisted two wires together, and began to spin the crank with a fury that pushed his turban to a

rakish angle and made the sweat pour from his high, tanned forehead into his beard. Finally the motor sputtered and started on three feeble cylinders.

I got in to test it. Neither foot nor emergency brakes worked. I swung it around in the road, got out and ordered my bags removed. The driver set up a howl. I began tossing my luggage from the car and ordered it to be taken back into the palace, sent for my interpreter and demanded a more reliable conveyance. I had paid one hundred and twenty dollars for a car to carry me on what I expected to be a two-day journey. I ordered another car — a lorry, as they are generally in better condition and more powerful for mountain climbing.

It was late afternoon when my agents started on the quest for a lorry. They returned several times to plead with me to take the wrecked Ford, but I was adamant.

My demand for a lorry was fulfilled when at ten o'clock a one-and-a-half-ton Dodge growled up to the gate. The driver, so my interpreter declared, was a man of parts in the Afghan realm of motors. I was assured that his ability was beyond question because in his veins flowed Turkish blood. Therefore, he was acquainted with Western mechanical magic.

The ends of his turban hung loosely over his shoulders as though the whole thing were about to unwind. The pupils of his eyes were dilated, and the sacks beneath them puffed like tumours. His loose lower lip dropped into his beard. He was sullen and without a greeting for me. I took my seat beside him.

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He was angry because he had lost money by having to get a lorry instead of the rattle-trap Ford.

After riding a mile through town, we stopped and picked up three armed men. Their usually sharp, clear eyes were bleary. At the gate of the city we stopped again. All of them went up on the roof of a caravanserai. Half a hundred men were squatting there in groups on rugs thrown on the floor. The smoke of drugs hung in the air. The driver and the guards ordered a pipe of hashish. I knew that they were already far under its influence, and took it away from them. Their expression said, 'Just one?'

I said, 'No', and threw down some coins to reimburse them for what they had spent. They pushed them back at me with their feet.

I saw no need of starting trouble so early on the trip. There was little I could do in any event. I had to rely on these men to see me through perhaps the most dangerous territory in mid-Asia. I am inclined to trust men who have their own skins at stake not to do things which jeopardize their safety. This at least was a comforting thought as I heard the smoke bubbling through the water and their racking coughs crack above the snores and chatter of the other smokers. They finished. I drank some brandy and stepped back into the lorry with them, my courage slightly revived.

The road was a caravan trail. The last snow melting on the surrounding mountains had cut deep gashes in it. We crossed several streams that were dry but for a meandering rivulet, and reached high country.

There were several feet of play in the steering wheel. I noticed that it had to be spun like a roulette-wheel before it took hold. I had not tested the brakes, but on down grades I realized that we had no foot brake. Reverse and low gear and impromptu twistings were all we had to rely on in an emergency.

The night was clear and cool.

About two o'clock we came to a series of streams.

The guards slept in the back of the lorry, their rifles beside them rattling over the bumps. The first stream we came to was about thirty yards in width and rushing in torrent.

I awakened one of the men and directed him to wade the river. It was a bit over knee-deep. We crossed it with a roar. The second stream, not so wide, was easily made. The third, wider and swifter, looked tough. My man waded in several paths and finally found one that was passable. I directed the driver to follow.

Throwing the car into low gear and dropping his foot on the accelerator, he plunged into the torrent. Instead of following the man, he went directly for the opposite bank, which rose ahead of us two feet above water level. With a crash we hit it. My head struck the side of the wind shield.

When I came to, with a good-sized bump and a cut on my forehead, water was rushing across the foot-board. My companions climbed out on to the bank with a shrug of their shoulders. I followed. Spreading their prayer rugs on the bare ground, they stretched out and fell asleep. It was Allah's will.

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The hills rolling into the mountains around us that had been a blaze of gold during the hot day were silver in the moonlight.

Two hours passed. My drugged crew slept. The mountain torrent was lowering fast. As it plunged down the dry valley, it carried with it a great mass of sand and gravel. Striking the car, it deposited its load. Already at the reduced water level the lorry was firmly imbedded in silt and small rocks.

I managed to awaken the men. Two of them walked off into the hills.

Dawn had not yet broken when across, on the far slope, a weird contingent appeared. Two-score men with gun barrels glistening, donkeys with fantastic, bulbous burdens, and oxen came over the level plateau to the car. The donkeys' loads were desert thistle. This the Afghans unloaded and piled in large, mysterious heaps.

The river had dropped about even with the rear axle, which was embedded in the sand. The men removed their clothes, walked into the stream with the oxen, eight sleepy beasts. After digging into the sand, a strand of rope about ten feet long was attached to the exposed part of the rear axle and the other to the crude harness of the oxen.

I protested and with gestures showed that they must dig the sand away first. It was of no avail. The rope fastened, they goaded the animals with stubby sticks. The animals leaned, and the rope snapped. This was repeated till the many knots in the re-tied strand so shortened it that it was no longer of use.

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A tribesman set fire to the thistle. It burst into great yellow and red flames, lighting the valley with the help of the first break of day. They stuck their legs close to the fire and held their wet garments to the heat. Dried from the labours in the water, they shouldered their guns, drove the animals up the hillside and vanished.

We had no shovels. With our hands and with sticks we dug the sand from the imbedded car. Thirty-six hours later we were on our way.

At dawn Khelat was a vague, grey shadow down the valley. Its mud fortresses, crowning sheer hills which troops of forgotten conquerors once had stormed, were much like the ramparts of ancient days. They looked down on an identical confusion of squat clay huts. A caravan of camels knelt by the gate. The town slept. The babble of the bazaar had not begun. Only occasional breaths of the stench of all Afghan towns rode the morning air, testifying to life behind the gates.

The crew slept. I drove the lorry. My only company through the last hours of the night's drive had been the occasional cries from a mullah whom I had picked up along the way and who insisted upon riding on top of the car. He brought the curses of Allah upon me when I hit the pot holes in the road. He had chosen his perilous perch for religion's sake. There he was able to compromise between a long, hard walk and contamination from too close contact with an infidel.

At a tea house near the gate we stopped just as the sun was laying down a barrage of fire across the top of the eastern mountains. While my samovar was

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boiling, I walked around the corner of the tea house into an adjoining courtyard.

At the side of a building were two men, pressed erectly against two low doors. They were talking. The immobile position of their heads seemed unnatural. They turned neither to the left nor to the right. They followed me with rolling black eyes beneath thick brows. As I came closer, I noticed that their turbans and the shoulders of their tunics were stiff with dried blood. Their heads were wedged between blocks of wood fastened on the doors. Their ears were spiked to the blocks. They could hear the chatter of the tea drinkers on the mud porch and smell the smoke of water pipes, but could not turn to see them.

An interpreter was brought. Over tea, boiled eggs and bread we discussed the next stage of the journey.

His advice to me was interrupted by a new arrival's wandering towards us, leaning on a tall staff. The wayfarer's silky beard was Christ-like. Filthy rags fell over his shoulders. His shoes were pointed. At the toes and heels were beads of red and blue. His dirty turban was wound with silk. Grinning, he exposed jagged teeth, stained by betel-nut, and the grin spread fans of crow's-feet around his watery eyes, the lids of which were smeared with mascara. A wilted rose was tucked beneath his ear.

He was a dervish. He knew of demons and sprites and strange, charmed ways to make love and hate. For a cup of sugar-laden tea and a breath of hashish, he could bring fabulous romance into the stern lives of his hearers.

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TEA BY THE ROADSIDE

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He sipped his tea and spun his yarn, pointing to the far eastern peak that balanced the rising sun as a seal does a coloured ball. 'That is Solomon's cliff,' he said and began to sing its story.

If a man will climb down and sit upon that ledge, he will be ever successful in war and in love. For it was on this very spot that Solomon, riding with his voluptuous bride from India on the green-silk carpet that conveyed them through the skies, ordered it to stop and let his girl-wife rest and look back across the mountains to the plains of the Indian homeland she was leaving for ever.

And the peak of the mountain is traversed by a short tunnel. If a man will go there and throw a stone through this cavern, he will for ever be able to order all the devils to do his will. And this is because Solomon and his bridal party appeared so suddenly out of the sky. They caught a malignant imp sunning himself on the lofty range. So surprised was the demon and so much afraid of the rippling green carpet and its distinguished riders that he jumped straight through the side of the mountain. A stone sent after him is certain to strike him, lurking somewhere in the depths below.

Their guns at their hand, their teacups poised nonchalantly, the desert men listened to the story as the hot day exploded over the sands.

The two pinioned men were still watching Solomon's Peak when my car wiggled through the awakened bazaar. With sunrise we left Khelat-a-Khelat.

Late in the afternoon we were winding down the

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valley over nondescript roads, passing scraggly villages, fields of red and white poppies, ragged herdsmen and spaces where stone and drought had won again their perennial battle with Afghan farmers.

For many miles there was no life of any sort. Then in the distance I saw a grove of cypress and birch, inevitable medals of man's victory over arid winds. The grove was too small to mark a town.

In its centre was a strange structure, a huge, square building, taller than any in Afghanistan — four stories. Bright blue columns supported its crimson roof. The glass was broken in many of the myriad, square-paned windows. There was no one about the place. Desert weeds and rank grass flourished in the lawn that was cut by irrigation ditches.

The car stopped at a break which made a path through the vegetation. Excitedly the driver motioned for me to get out and go in. I did so, and walked towards the door alone. Here I was met by half a dozen Afghans. They wore their native baggy trousers topped by short European coats. Each one shook my hand. One spoke French, which I understand no better than I do Peshtu. I was directed up a white, balustraded stairway.

On the top floor we entered a small, carpeted room without any furniture but one upholstered chair with a gilt back and frayed, threadbare satin covering which was set out for me. More and more Afghans came and sat down until the wall was lined with them. We had tea, chunks of cold mutton, huge dry onions, fruit and *lavash*.

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When the meal was finished, I rose and thanked my hosts. One by one they limply shook my hand. I was in a hurry to get on. I knew not why I had stopped nor how they had come to expect me, nor what purpose the European mansion, with its empty, carpeted rooms, served people of a desert valley on the roof of the world.

In Kabul I inquired about it but got no answer. Perhaps those I asked had never been that way. And so to me it still stands a mystery — a gaunt, square palace, housing phantoms that greet strangers in French and feed them on cold mutton.

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CHAPTER IX

GHAZNI, on a mountain-rimmed plateau four thousand feet above Kandahar, is the gateway to the tortuous passes that lead to Kabul. It was the next town on our route. Through the centuries many an attacking army on its march to the capital has gone no farther than this squalid city.

The road from Ghazni to Kabul winds unrelentingly upward. First it rolls off the plateau over ripples of foothills before it mounts into the ranges that guard the city of Afghan kings. Peaks are from twelve to sixteen thousand feet. Kabul is seven thousand five hundred feet up, but the approach is over mountains so high that the citadel first appears in a low valley.

I was disappointed that Ghazni was not, as I supposed it to be, Kabul. When first I sighted its trees, blurred on the distant horizon, pointing that way, I asked, 'Kabul?'

My companion nodded, understanding me to mean that Kabul was in the direction which I indicated. At Ghazni I was ready to unload, until I was made to understand that Kabul was still eighteen hours beyond. By now the ride ahead seemed negligible both in time and distance. It was like the last stretch of a walk home from the city with a heavy bundle. I felt that it was just a few more turns in the road.

We were well into the hills by four o'clock in the afternoon. The driver and an attaché of the governor

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of Kandahar's Foreign Office were the only passengers with me. Why the governor of Kandahar had a Foreign Office I never learned. I suspect that he did not, and that my interpreter had conferred the title of foreign attaché upon the Afghan official assigned to ride with me.

It seemed sacrilege to feel as ill-tempered as I did amid lofty mountains saturated with orange and black sunset, but my companion grated on my nerves. He was a stubby little fellow about thirty years old, who wore a double-breasted, blue serge suit and carried in his lap a blue gabardine topcoat, in the pocket of which was a little whiskbroom that he took out at intervals of every fifteen minutes to swish the dust of the journey from his clothes. When he smoked a cigarette, he placed it between the forefinger and second finger, closed his fist and sucked at the fist, drawing smoke far into his lungs with a noisy inhalation.

As night fell, the swish of the whiskbroom and his breathing through his fist became two sounds indistinguishable from each other — both of them sending shivers of rage up and down my back.

When he lit a cigarette, I could see his smug, piggish little face and larcenous little eyes. I came to associate all the discomforts and hazards of my journey with him, and in some way to blame him for them. As the night went on, I thought at each hiss he made I would hit him the next time he did it.

No armed men were travelling with us. They had left us at Ghazni. I guessed the reason, after two hours

of the journey — the roads were patrolled. As the evening wore on, we were challenged at more frequent intervals. We had pulled high into the hills, riding along a narrow road with sheer cliffs on one side and a precipitous drop of several hundred feet on the other. At each turn the lights shot far out into space. Here in a break in the cliff we came to a caravanserai used as a garrison for troops. At its gate a great log was laid across the road so that we could go no farther.

It was about eleven o'clock. Officers came out at a sentry's call. One of them who said he had been in the Indian army spoke English fairly well. He explained that his orders were that we could not go on, and invited us to occupy his quarters for the night; but Kabul was only eight or nine hours away, and I did not want to spend another day getting there. Besides, I preferred to arrive in the morning rather than the evening.

My smug companion wanted to stay and was climbing out. That more than anything else determined me to go on. The officer told me that the road was closed but my credentials would pass me by any sentry. He said, however, that the only risk I ran besides that of bandits was that his snipers, perched in the hills for the next fifty miles, had orders to fire upon any suspicious movements along the closed road and that one of them might fire without stopping to inquire.

The foreign attaché got out of the car, draped his topcoat over his arm and started for the barracks. I told the officer to tell him to stay if he wanted to, but I was going on, and I motioned to my driver to step

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on the starter. The motor roared, and the attaché came running back.

The next twenty miles through steep mountain gorges were exciting ones. I had come to think of highwaymen as myths, but the notion that an over-alert sentry might take a pot-shot at us kept me awake, let me forget the irritating fellow with me and caused me to catch all of the lace-like beauty of the mountains in the moonlight.

Every sentry's cry was an added thrill. At some places along the trail there was no human challenger, only a log thrown across the road. At each of these stops, the rattle of stones preceded a doughty soldier clambering down the cliff-side to hear our password and tug the log aside.

By two o'clock we were crawling up a steep grade in low gear. The radiator was pouring white steam into the clear air. The trail was so narrow that the car completely filled it. At each sharp turn which required backing up and cramping the wheel several times, the fender of the lorry shot out over the canyon. Each time I estimated how close the tyre was to the unballasted edge. It couldn't have been more than an inch or two.

Around each curve was another flash of rare, dream-like beauty — great rocks, moonlight and black voids tossed about with god-like abandon.

Within half an hour we were stopped at a mud settlement sleeping on the cliff-side. It was still five hours to Kabul. There was no officer at the post to authorize us to proceed; the guard in charge could not read our

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letters, and a password was not adequate to let us down the mountain side into fabulous Kabul.

In the single clay house perched on the steep slope shone the only light in the village. It was a typical tea house, enclosed on only three sides, with carpets on the mud floor and an oil lamp burning in a far corner. Despite the adequacy of ventilation it stank of burned grease, unwashed bodies and decayed fruit. The guards not on duty were asleep on the floor. I unstrapped my camp bed, and a soldier set it up in the muggy room.

A lone cypress tree had grown bravely on the rocky hillside. Down a cliff across a cut in the rock dropped a tall waterfall like a silver exclamation mark, faintly spattering in the canyon far below. I had my bed taken out of the house and put under the tree. Ten thousand feet up it is cold at three in the morning, but I did not unroll my bedding. I lay down and spread an overcoat over myself. A soldier hung a lantern on the tree. I motioned for him to take it away, but he did not understand.

I would be in the city before noon, and I was wakeful at first, making plans. But sleep comes in that thin air like a veiled woman in soft slippers down a quiet street.

I had not slept long, as chilled and fussing, I curled up under my coat, when I awakened, conscious of the presence of others. I turned and opened my eyes to see a bayonet a few inches above my face flashing in the light of the lantern that still hung on the tree.

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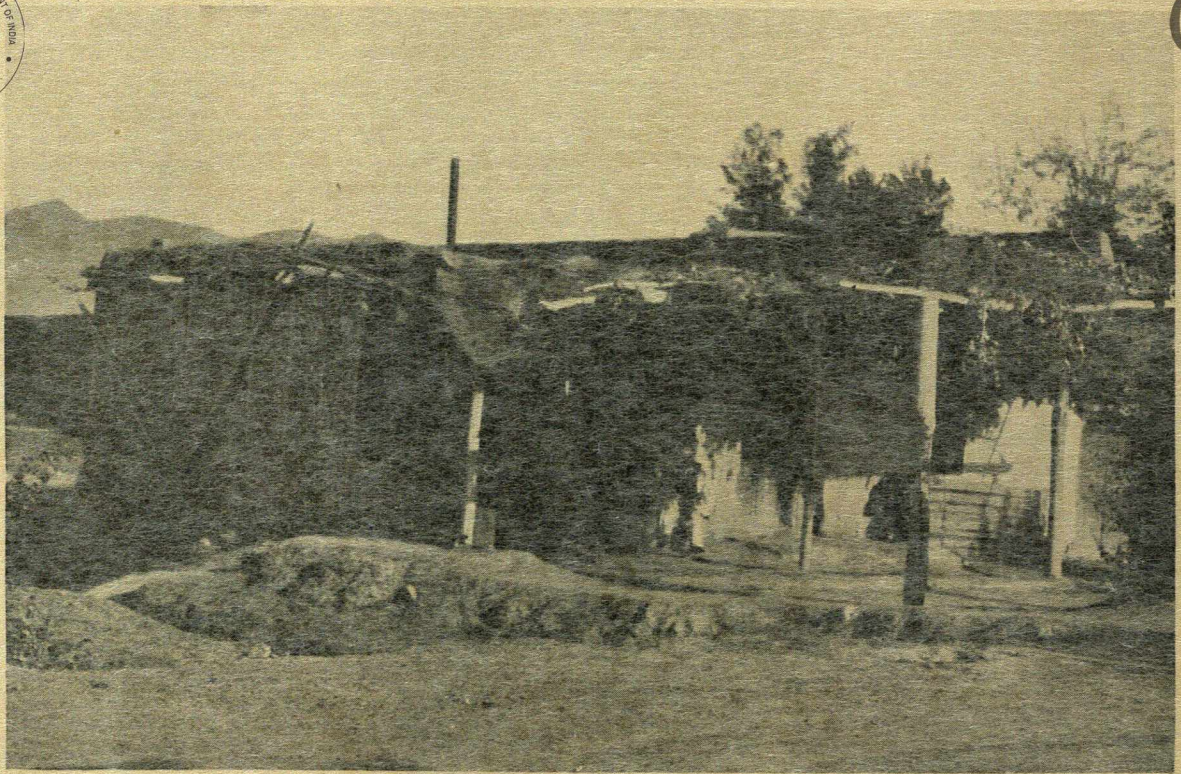

A HOUSE IN AN AFGHAN VILLAGE

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But that was not all, as I soon realized. The bayonet was fixed on a rifle, and the rifle was held by an Afghan who was laughing! So were the other half dozen turbanned fellows with him.

I recalled the advice given me by an official in Kandahar. He had said with a sophisticated air, 'You know our religion and yours do not agree. Our people are faithful, and many are fanatics. Should someone spit in your face as you walk in the bazaar, please ignore it and remember the difference in our creeds. It will cause less trouble'.

I also recalled the incident of the American Consul in Teheran who had died with a hundred and thirty stab wounds because he had failed to recognize a Mohammedan courtesy. I wondered whether I had made some such breach of etiquette, for I knew that the Afghans were far quicker on the trigger than the Persians as well as more sensitive about their religion.

In my sleepy way I did not get the connection between amused men and a fixed bayonet prodded at my throat. Then I caught it. The relief guard had come on duty and were having a look at the American. The threatening gestures they had been enjoying were but a bit of Afghan humour. I was glad to realize it.

The sun, with curt contempt for the world it shines upon, came up out of India. Kabul was answering with grim scintillations, for Kabul had always been impudent.

As the twisting road pulled the city closer, it seemed that the past, with all its mysteries, its dead hopes and

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its futile love of life, was rushing at me. I was coming from America with its paved highways and busy millions pushing into picture theatres, to a forbidden city where time stands still and youth looks backwards.

Down the hill we coasted on to a gravelled boulevard lined with newly planted willow trees. Amanullah had laid out this street after the manner of avenues in Berlin.

When the Aryans were making their way toward the Tigris and Euphrates to build now vanished civilizations, Kabul was already a city. When sharp-eyed tribes found their way through Khyber Pass to conquer the lush plains of pre-historic India, this city in the hills was known.

The hotel — the only one in Afghanistan — stands on a quiet corner of a street that runs along the palace wall. On the opposite corner is a wrecked cinema theatre. The hotel had suffered too from the revolution. Amanullah had had it reconstructed in the expansive fashion of a continental hostelry. There must be fifty rooms on the upper floor. The lower floor had been devoted to lounges, dining rooms, billiard rooms and banquet halls.

When I arrived, it was derelict. Floors and stairs were carpetless. A couple of Afghans were taking a nap on the billiard tables, from which the cloth was worn. The dining room had one long table in it; the rest of the room looked like a barn with its wide planks of rough-hewn timber. The only furnished room in the hotel was a tea-room having a dozen tables spread

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with dirty covers. In the music-room was a battered piano with an earthen crock for a stool. The lobby possessed but a single, board bench. The manager's office, with a little window through which he transacted his business, looked like the ticket office of a wayside railway station.

My companion, who clearly hated me as heartily as I did him, stood by, surly and impatient, while we waited half an hour for the manager to be found and brought to the hotel.

The manager was a suave Afghan who wore a turban, a collarless dress-shirt with the tails hanging over his trousers, and a pair of black, lace shoes, both of which were slit to make way for his little toes to look out on the world. He spoke English excellently, and I have yet to run into another such smiling, mendacious villain.

I was his sole guest, and I wanted accommodation only until I could call on the Foreign Office. I was tired, unshaven, unwashed and irate. He could give me a room and three meals for seven hundred and fifty afghanis.

I had no intention of haggling with an innkeeper who had the pronounced advantage of being the one and only innkeeper in a nation of ten million people; and I was further handicapped by a rising temper, which precluded the niceties of oriental bargaining. I knew that he and my companion were going to split the overcharge. I told him that I would sleep in the street and report the entire incident to the Foreign Minister when I called on him in the morning. I got

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room and board for seventy-five afghanis a day, with a bearer thrown in.

I went to bed in the heat of the day and slept, despite the interest the vermin showed in the first occupant the room had received for many moons.

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CHAPTER X

I AWOKE to find Kabul alive with gay crowds. The celebration of the tenth anniversary of their independence was beginning. There were more country than city people among the throngs. Bands of tribesmen in from their rocky haunts were trekking towards the celebration grounds and wandering through the banner-bedecked town.

No impression of Afghanistan would be complete which overlooked the importance of these tribesmen — strong, stalwart, wiry men who tramp up and down the country bent on banditry, or herding and ploughing. With only a sheet of thin, unleavened bread and an onion for food, they will walk twenty-five to thirty miles a day in heavy-soled, pointed shoes, rough as hewn boxes, that strew nails in their wake.

It is estimated that there are between seven and eight million of these fellows in the country. They, not Kabul, are Afghanistan. They, not the merchants, politicians and statesmen of the capital, represent the temper and force of the nation. The shadow of their threat hangs always over the town, for it is they who are the king-makers. Kabul and its vicissitudes can only be appreciated in relation to these fierce tribesmen. The seven cities of Afghanistan are only the froth on the Afghan ocean of deeply imbedded, age-old prejudices and customs.

It is actually the tribes who have made both the

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capital and the nation. It is they who anomalously, in almost constant rebellion against central authority, have kept the grim country an entity, despite the ravages of conquerors.

A shrewd Macedonian general advised Alexander, 'You can never hold Afghanistan by holding Kabul'. The general was right. Within thirty years after Alexander had captured the city and believed he had bound the Afghan people securely to his empire, there was nothing left to recall the Greek invasion but crude, worthless coins struck with the placid profile of the forgotten young emperor.

No more potent testimony to their power exists than the record of the Afghan-British wars. The regiments of Great Britain's armies that stormed victoriously through Africa and Asia have suffered, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, but three decisive defeats at the hands of an independent nation.

Only the Afghans defeated the British Empire, not once, but three times, at their own game of war. The defeat of British troops, long accustomed to oriental fighting, during the First Afghan War remains one that European armies cannot explain in any fashion other than to say that the British were out-fought by the Afghans. The second Afghan War was another debacle. The Third Afghan War merely showed that even the vast development of Great Britain's fighting methods during those four bitter years, 1914 to 1918, still did not enable her to subdue the Afghans.

In all these campaigns of guerrilla sniping and furious charges it was the tribes, not the armies of the

king, which were reponsible for Afghan victories. Through all three campaigns against the British, covering a century, the same story repeated itself. In each war the British armies administered prompt and decisive initial defeats to the Afghan armies; but each time as the foreigners rested for breath after their ordeal, the tribesmen swept down from the hills.

In one engagement things were going against the tribesmen. As the British unit rushed in pursuit of them over the dead and wounded Afghans strewn on the battlefield, a major suddenly tripped as he felt a stinging wound in the calf of his leg. He had been bitten by a fallen Afghan tribesman who, though dying, caught the officer's leg as he ran past.

As the English soldier turned to fire at the wounded man, the Afghan said, 'I could kill your whole army alone and would do it now, if Allah had not given me a bad belly-ache.'

That was his excuse to himself. He ignored the bloody wound in his shoulder and the shot in his leg. To admit that the bullets had downed him would be to admit that his enemy had had a part in his destruction. He reasoned another way: Allah had given him the stomach-ache with which he came into battle. Had it not been for that indisposition, he would not have been wounded. A morale built on such stuff is difficult to impress with defeat, no matter what the odds.

The tribes of Afghanistan are as numerous as cucumbers in a Russian village and of as great variety, size and temperament. Afghanistan is generally regarded as being divided into seven districts, each

district embracing a predominant majority of one of the seven leading races. In addition to these seven dominant peoples there are twelve other distinct tribes. Each one of these nineteen groups is subdivided into subordinate clans numbering altogether close on one hundred and fifty separate tribal units.

Among these the Duranis are foremost. From the Durani tribes the kings of Afghanistan have for centuries been recruited, and the Durani thinks of himself as the true Afghan. Together with the Duranis, the Ghilzais, Hazaras, Tajics and Ushegs make up the leading peoples of the central states of the nation. On the eastern border is the territory of the fighting Pathans; and on the western border, the agrarian Heratis. Though each tribe feels a strong allegiance to its own peculiar traditions and regards with suspicion all central control, the tribes do have a common character, are loosely bound together in a federal state and work in unison under the pressure of any foreign threat.

An English military man who has written on the subject of the characteristics of the tribesmen lists their virtue and their shortcomings side by side. It is well done, and I take from his account those items that impress me as being similar to my impressions, with a few contributions of my own.

They are brave to the point of abandon and easily discouraged by failure. They are proud of their race, and honour is esteemed above life, yet they are treacherous and faithless. Their piercing black eyes, alive to every stimulus, are the windows of observing

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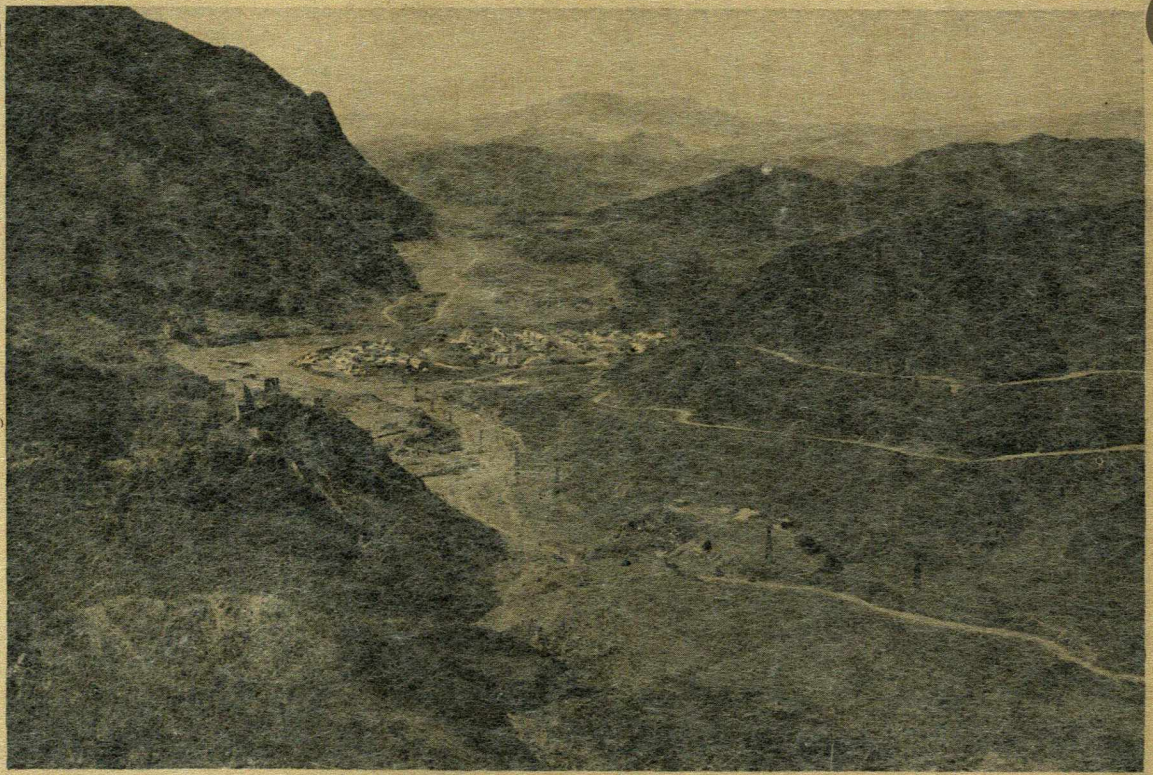

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souls. Their observations are correlated and sifted by a swift, keen intelligence. They are realists, who make decisions to act upon cold fact. Yet they are superstitious beyond even the American Indian.

Though they are inclined more than any other orientals to abrupt, immediate action when the urge be stirred by religion or greed or hate, the passive philosophy blown from India's millions has its effect. 'It is stupid,' they say, 'to do something you do not want to do, unless you must do it.'

They are inclined not to accept credit nor approbation for their good deeds, claiming that fate and Allah brought them about. On the other hand, they as quickly disclaim responsibility for their acts and the acts of others, laying the blame equally upon strange, unseen powers.

At a celebration which attracted a hundred and twenty thousand tribesmen, a Hindu was demonstrating a new Ford car. He had brought the car from Peshawar in an effort to persuade the Minister of War to equip the army with several hundred Fords. I rode with him to the grounds — a vast oblong a mile in length and a third of a mile wide. In the centre of this, the motor salesman cleared a great circle. Thousands of clansmen stood back from the edge of the grassy clearing as the Hindu described a wide arc by clamping the front wheels of the car. To show the new type of steering device, he stepped from the car, leaving the wheels clamped and letting it continue, driverless, around and around. Once the track was made in the grass, he set his foot at the edge of the

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impression and the car would pass, grazing his toes by the fraction of an inch. The bearded hillmen stared at the magic performance with controlled interest.

'What did they say about it?' I asked the Hindu.

'They all say, "Allah is great!" '

As they gave the motor engineers little credit for their achievements, so they will take little blame upon themselves for their own failures or successes.

When it comes to executing deeds of vengeance prescribed by their harsh code, the Afghan does not rely entirely upon Allah but takes him into a partnership, of which the tribesman is the active force. Feuds — tribal and between clans, the inevitable product of loosely bound, primitive social systems — occupy much of his attention. Though banditry is an important business, when the state has bought its peace through regular payment of subsidies to tribal chieftains, the Afghan has time on his hands for personal matters of a bloody nature.

From time immemorial his weapons have been as sacred and ever-present as his fierce pride. His shoes may be worn to the ground and his home without food or rugs, but the self-respecting Afghan will be armed. He will rob or he will sell his daughter to buy a rifle. If a rifle is not to be purchased, his ingenuity in fashioning weapons stands him in good stead.

In addition to his rifle, which he carries over his shoulder, and a sling of cartridges that glisten like clean jewels across his filthy tunic, he will also be equipped with a short dagger sheathed in a home-

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made scabbard of sheepskin. This may be stuck in his belt or hang around his neck on a polished chain. In lieu of the dagger, a sword much like a bayonet may dangle from his belt; the hilt of the sword will have no protective device to shield the hand that holds it, and it will be buried deep in the scabbard with only half the pronged handle peeping out. But he is quick to draw it, and swift and sure in his management of it.

In Kabul I was asked by a doctor to go with him to the scene of a tragedy. An Afghan had died of disease before he had liquidated a family grievance against a nearby householder.

His enemy had come to the home where the corpse lay, to bargain. By payment of money he hoped to wash away the enmity between the two houses. He was accompanied by friends and two Afghan soldiers, who stood by alert and on guard against the crucial meeting between the son of the dead man and his father's enemy.

The son was outnumbered ten to one; his dagger was sheathed. He approached his father's enemy with an oily 'salaam'. The petitioner opened his mouth to reply to the greeting, but words did not come, so quickly was the young Afghan's knife plunged into the brown throat of his father's enemy.

Stories of wars between tribes and of vindictive family feuds within the clans are alike in being gory tales of retaliations carried out with relentless patience. It is not uncommon for an Afghan to sit on the roof of his house behind a low parapet every day throughout the year or until such time as his sworn enemy pass

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by and he can shoot him from ambush. These blood quarrels have their roots in Islamic concepts. The law of the Prophet, which governs the customs of the people, is uncodified and is interpreted by the mullahs. Its general tenets are a part of the religious education of even the most humble.

One day when I was riding in the Afghan hills, I picked up an armed wayfarer, a squatty little fellow, dirty from head to foot. His cartridge sling and musket were the only clean items on his person.

My driver interpreted for me. The traveller, who was trudging over the desert, miles from water or habitation, was on his way to his hill village. He had been levied for the army, had reported to the recruiting officer and learned that he had five days before he would be sent off.

He was going back to his hills to make an attempt to finish off a little job, the obligation of which troubled his brown conscience. His father had been killed in a feud and he was spending his extra time in a last search for the murderer. Therefore his rifle was shipshape.

Survival in the hills is difficult. The baby born in the hut of a Ghilzai tribesmen faces a host of dangers. Rampant venereal disease may well prevent his eyes from ever seeing the sun come over the Hindu Kush. The charms with which filthy midwives exorcize the devils may plant other and varied infections. A feeble cry from an under-weight, new-born babe may be its death warrant, for unhealthy and unpromising children are often done away with.

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Through childhood the Afghan's stamina is tested by the broiling sun of the valleys in summer and the bitter cold of the nights in winter. No man holds a brief for weakness. Maturity means that the ruthless approval of primitive courts has been won. Iron, the Afghan says, makes little mark on stone.

Softer Asiatic peoples who have come in contact with this hardy race have invariably got the worst of it. The Tartars and the Turks have never been a match for the Afghans. Slavery, theoretically abolished a few years ago, had been for centuries the order of the day, and it was the wiry Tartars who were the source of supply for Afghan slave-markets.

The stark life of the Afghan leaves no room for small virtues or puny vices. Pettiness is no part of the tribesman's make-up. His obligations as a generous host are as natural and unconscious as his codes of vengeance.

In his banditry, so I was told by victims, the Afghan is not without a sense of humour. A German driving his car from Jalalabad to Kabul was attacked about sixteen miles out of the capital. The robbers took the entire contents of the car, then set fire to it. After that they stripped him of his clothes and headed him naked down the trail to the town. It was mid-day and in summer. He had only gone a few yards, fearing the ravages of the sun more than the bandits, when a tribesman came running up to him holding out a bundle of German newspapers. The European was not at that moment concerned with current events in his native land. He took the papers, carried them a

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few paces, then threw them down. Again the brigands brought them to him, undid the bundle, draped and wound the newspapers about his body and over his head, fixing them with sticks and tying them in place as he walked on his way, followed for a mile by the laughing Afghans.

The sight of a band of tribesmen galloping down the hillside to block the trail one is travelling is an alarming experience. Motives of men on horseback can always be suspected; so, too, can the approach of a score of armed men marching toward one on a quiet mountain road upset the peace of the journey.

But other episodes of the road are often without comedy. An Italian driving a motor lorry was accosted by a few tribesmen. He speeded up his motor as he saw them in the road ahead; they jumped on to the running board. He drew a pistol and shot two of them; the third dropped off. Within twelve hours after he reached Kabul, he was arrested and thrown into a dungeon, charged with murder. He had mistaken Afghan hikers for bandits.

The British along the Khyber Pass had endless trouble with Afghan raiders who shot sentries and stole their arms. In these forays there was no organized raid. The attacks appeared to be the private enterprise of single tribesmen in search of a rifle. Only by putting the sentry in a cage and chaining his rifle to it in such a fashion that it would take some time to break the chain, were the British able to put a stop to this form of murder.

Their love for daring sports is almost equal to their

love for gruesome games of robbery or for stalking one another.

During periods of truce the Afghan horsemen are polo fans. They sit on a hillside and look down on the regimental matches, taking sides and wagering their possessions on their favourites. One season a tribal war and the polo matches conflicted. The Afghan raiders sent down word that they would appreciate a truce during the days of the polo game. They said that they did not wish to spoil the sport, though they were ready and willing after the last chukker was over to shoot any member of the teams.

Once on a hunting expedition I passed many graves of fallen feudists, buried where they had dropped. These ever-present tombs which dot barren wastes are great, oblong heaps of stones. From tall sticks frayed rags hang limp in the still air above them.

Passing one of these I bent down to pick up a stone and throw it on the grave, as is the custom of the people. That is why the graves look as though giants were buried in them. Before I had a chance to toss the rock, my arm was stayed by the brown hand of one of the three guards who were following me. Politely he grinned and shook his head and took the stone from me to hurl it far into the canyon.

I assumed that they wanted no Christian to pay tribute to a dead Moslem, although I had been told in Kandahar to follow this practice since it pleased the natives. I inquired of my interpreter why I had been stopped.

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He said, 'Only one reason. The grave was that of an enemy of the man who stayed your hand. He made the grave necessary.'

Islam rules the religious world of the Afghan; but the tribes, far older than the Prophet, have never thrown off the superstitions and beliefs that were theirs before the monotheistic Mohammed engulfed them in his tenets. They were too deeply embedded in Asia to have missed the mysticism of the other Asiatic nations that billow up to their borders.

Though they will die for the glory of a Mussulman's paradise and kill for the orthodox precepts of Mohammedanism, that stern, moral religion offers nothing like the healthy humanity of older religions. Many of the concepts that filtered from the Ayran nomads who wandered down to build Nineveh and Athens have lent bits of fancies to their thought.

These more concrete personifications of the occult enliven the tribes' philosophy. Very practical beliefs they are, too. In them are precise inventions for the efficacious eliminations of everyday troubles. Running over these superstitions, one is struck by the number of them that exist for the mental peace and power of the ignorant, cloistered woman. The wife in her harem has two tyrants, the mother-in-law, who rules its everyday procedure; and the husband, who dominates his home outside the women's quarters.

Mohammed never thought of supplying pleasant little escapes for the women. He was far too concerned with broad, masculine faiths and the dictating of 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not' to his desert followers.

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From these pronouncements the ignorant and helpless wife got little satisfaction. Her veiled heart was weighed down with petty, household grievances.

The Afghan woman, relying on the old myths, believes that if she can give the flesh of an owl to either her husband or her mother-in-law, the victim will be for ever subdued and she can then parade her desires over a will made timid by the bird's flesh. Furthermore, if a wife will follow this recipe, she can be sure of results: Let her take a pot of copper, fill it with rotten eggs, honey and syrup, lentils, small pieces of glass, a handful of sharp nails and a pinch of carmine, carry it to a crossroad and there read over it a sacred charm. An explosion will occur. When the smoke clears away, a ball of fire will rise into the air; this will travel toward her oppressors, to haunt and burn them and so bring them to terms. Another similar concoction — if a witch can be secured to prepare it — is believed to stop haemorrhages after childbirth.

If a husband should have too much affection for his mother and too little for his wife, this formula is trusted: Take one male and one female frog, paint a figure of a black ox on the male and a red cow upon the female, tie them together, put them into an earthen pot, place over the fire and burn to a powder; then throw the dust into the face of the husband, and his affection turns from his mother. If the above ingredients are unobtainable, the heart of a sheep and the horn of a bull prepared in the same way are likely to get equal results.

The tribesman, brave at war, fears the devices his

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wife may work against him, for an Afghan proverb goes: 'A tortoise is no fish though it swims; nor a bat a bird though it flies. So a henpecked man is no man though he wears male garments.'

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CHAPTER XI

THE tribes, holding to the law of the Prophet, do not look lightly upon the drinking of liquor.

When I was in Kabul, drinking wine was a capital offence. Mohammed, the only practical prohibitionist, called for total abstinence. For centuries he got it from his adherents by the anomalous device not of denouncing the evils of drink, but rather by insinuating its pleasures instead. It was a nice trick. Life, after all, is short. As the reward for non-indulgence in this life Mohammed guaranteed a carouse throughout all eternity, with affable maidens to pour one exquisitely intoxicating beverages from bottomless jugs.

Afghanistan, the only existing nation subscribing *in toto* to Islamic law, makes it extremely difficult for a citizen not to make sure of plenty to drink in heaven, for wine-drinking is a crime punishable by death. The approved manner of dispatching the tippler into a parched hell is to set him upon a high wall and, without ado, push him off. The citizen who wants a stimulant consequently resorts to *chras* (hashish), and the sweet, spicy odour of this drug smoke filters through from many a tea house.

I had been in the city but a few days, and had met only a few English-speaking persons outside the foreign office. Among them was a Hindu up to sell motor cars to the government. I talked to him about the drinking situation, which for me was becoming acute. I wanted

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a bracer, but did not like the idea of *chras*. I wanted brandy or whisky. With the Hindu I set off one night to get it. I had violated man-made statutes forbidding the sale of alcoholic beverages in both the countries of the world that had such mundane statutes. This was my first breach of a sacred law on the matter.

For a week, with the temperature averaging a hundred and ten in the shade, I had been spending my days in a frock coat talking to statesmen. Every night I had been alone, listening to two English phonograph records I had found among a great stock of wailing Hindu songs.

It is pleasant enough the first few evenings to sit on the balcony of your home and look down over acres of flowers, metallic in the moonlight; to hear the fountain spattering; to see beyond the golden, clay walls of your garden the geometric shadows of angular, cubed houses, among which here and there puff the silver domes of mosques; to look up to a circle of surrounding mountain peaks that are luring a bright planet over their tops. It is thrilling just to sit and meditate on the fears and loves, hates and ambitions that have, since antiquity, made up life in the stinking city below.

But you tire of that, as you do of a dance record during which a crooner breaks out intermittently to declare that a 'cornflower was born for a bluebell'. This botanical romance, my only link with the outside world, soon left me cold.

A ten o'clock whisky and soda. Next to being on a homeward bound steamer, a whisky and soda was the thing I most wanted. Timorously I had brought three

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bottles of brandy over the border. They had gone long ago. I had drunk them surreptitiously, fearing that perhaps an Afghan dignitary might have a temperance reformer's nose for tracking down alcohol.

Amanullah's short-lived law modifying wine-drinking as a capital offence had been repealed, and I never became accustomed to committing a capital offence openly.

From foreign legations I had received an occasional gift of spirits. The German Engineering Company were permitted to import, for their personal use, a small quota. Though they promised me a share of the next consignment when it came through, their expected shipment did not arrive.

My Indian friend, Mirza Abdullah, had been hinting that there was a way to get whisky in Kabul.

Mirza Abdullah was of Mohammedan faith, a native of Peshawar. He had been educated in England and India. He was twenty-nine years old and an interesting type of the young Asiatic who has been steeped in liberal Western ideas, superimposed upon his heritage of hide-bound fanaticism. The antagonistic codes were stratified in him, acting independently.

He preached freedom for young people from the harsh customs of their ancestors in one breath; and in the next, shaking his head sadly, he deplored young girls in Peshawar smoking hashish cigarettes. He was a physicist with a high regard for true science and talked of it in terms of university classrooms. But he also cried out with alarm as I peeled a cucumber

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and started to eat the first bite I had sliced from its top.

'No, no, don't eat that!' he shouted. 'It's poison!'

'Let me show you.' He took another cucumber, cut about an inch off the top and rubbed the cut pieces together until a slight film of foam was worked up. 'There,' he said, pointing to the foam, 'that is poison. You must always rub it out before you eat.'

He was eloquent and understanding in his discussions of constitutional government. He exhibited an almost profound and rational knowledge of India and its internal politics. But he told me that on one occasion he had had an opportunity to touch Gandhi's foot while the Mahatma was speaking and that the contact produced an electric shock accompanied by a modest display of sparks.

To give credit to Abdullah's consistency where credit is due, he did denounce the Mohammedan ban against wine, and he did want a drink.

The first evening that we discussed the necessary descent into Kabul's underworld (which I have reason to believe had its beginning and end in the grisly group we eventually visited), we lost our impetus in words and never actually came to the point of setting out to look for liquor.

The second night, however — after another dry day had been added to the three hundred days since I sailed from home, and piled up on top of ennui, occasional taps of fever, dysentery, and greasy, dirty food — I was galvanized into action. The prospects of a few drinks took on the aspect of that Moslem heaven

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A STREET IN KABUL

which the faithful will suffer no end of inconvenience and even death to attain.

Kabul was still and dark as we set out. There was no moon, and the stars didn't give much light to the narrow, walled streets as Mirza Abdullah and I made our way through them with my bearer, snapping a flashlight. The intermittent funnel of light kept us out of the stinking ditches by the wayside and helped to guide us around the indiscriminate excrement deposited during the day by animals and children.

In some sections the dust underfoot was like walking on pillows; then stretches of jagged rock took us on to the wide road by the parapeted bank of the Kabul river.

This open route was a relief, a sense of space gave a feeling of security. There would be some place for a fellow to have a run for it.

I was getting jumpy. I had lately become indifferent, accustomed to possible mid-Asian perils. Then, as a lover is suddenly smitten with a horrified fear that his departing loved one will not survive the dangers of city traffic until he is to meet her two hours later, so all the advertised hazards of fanatical Afghanistan pressed in on me. I saw them anew as rawly outlined as I had pictured them before they had been dulled by that comforting adjustment the human organism can make to daily existence, no matter how unpleasant or insecure.

The entrance to the clay, canopied bazaar was like a huge black egg barring the starlit road. We had to go into this dismal cavern. The chaotic way in which

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this world has been arranged was never clearer to me. I needed a drink now to nerve me to go ahead and get the drink later.

Abdullah's fancy sent him to reminiscing. He kept calling up scenes along the river bank a few months before, when revolution was raging, unsavoury little anecdotes of violent death and corpses leaned against the parapet like tired wayfarers.

'It may be,' he said, 'that our man will not be there. He may have been caught and finished off.'

I missed my cue. I should have said, 'Perhaps we may as well go back and let it go for to-night.'

But the shrill cry of a sentry from the recess in a wall halted us and afforded a sensible way out. I showed him my pass, but he said that my bearer must stay with him, as my pass did not include the boy.

We passed through the portals of the bazaar. The shops that during the day had flamed with cotton prints, embroidered vests and silver bracelets were shuttered. The hammering of brass-smiths, the cries of vendors and bargain-hunters were still. We passed no dagger-bedecked tribesmen nor irate camel drivers shouting and prodding lethargic beasts out of our way. The bazaar was empty — a ghostly labyrinth of narrow passage ways twisting beneath an oval roof.

We followed the path our flashlight made to a circular intersection in the maze. In one arc of the circle horizontal stripes of lights cut through the shutters. I knew the place. Kabul has no banks, but here was its Threadneedle Street. Here on their haunches sat the money-changers through the day in their carpeted

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cave, placid, like images with offerings of coins piled at their feet. Now they were behind the shuttered blinds. I imagined them crouched in a carpeted bower ready for rest, passing their waterpipe from one to the other, with their reserves of silver coins in opulent heaps, counted and caressed.

At noon the same day when I had passed this way, I had bargained with the money changers. While we argued, the kaleidoscopic parade milled around us. A naked youth, his body daubed with dry mud and his stiff, black hair caked with it, staggered by, drooling, his red eyes blank, his fingers nails bitten to the quick. He mumbled and saw no one. The crowd was oblivious to the idiot. It was a hundred and fifty in the sun, which beat down upon the half-uncovered circle, while I argued over rates of exchange with swarthy usurers. The sun-struck imbecile stood in the baking heat. As I talked, I saw him, out of the corner of my eye, drop like a plummet. When I turned to go on, he was lying still, the sun drying the whites of his half-open eyes.

An hour or two later when I passed that way again, he was still there. Someone had turned him over on his face.

As Mirza Abdullah and I walked through the circle to enter another interminable black cave, I turned the flashlight on the spot where I had seen the naked pauper die. I was relieved to find that he was gone. I told my companion what I had seen that afternoon. He dismissed it summarily. 'Are there not damn fools everywhere?'

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Somehow the expedition was not qualifying as a prologue for a gay adventure. The ghoulish aspects of it were too thickly piled. Then there was the recurring notion that I was bent on committing a crime punishable by death. I was sure I would be immune, of course, but those with whom I dealt would certainly not be.

I thought of Omar's nagging the Fates, 'Oh thou who didst with pitfall and with gin beset the road I was to wander in.'

We turned off into a passageway so narrow we had to walk single file for a dozen yards and then into a walled enclosure that sloped steeply. On the far side of the wall the river gurgled. We flashed the light around on half a dozen camels spread out on their bellies. The place was lined with shaded platforms and the platforms were heaped with shadowy, canvas-encased bales. It was some sort of warehouse and caravanserai where merchants from Samarkand, Punjab and Tibet stored their goods.

There was the odour of tea and heavy spices and dried sheep-gut. A charcoal blaze pushed up a gauzy red glow around a copper samovar in the far corner of the courtyard, like a burnished pin-headed idol sitting before his fire. Several men were lounging on the mud platform near the whistling kettle. Two Mongol merchants in long quilted jackets and conical caps puffed slender straight-stemmed pipes with silver balls at the ends. The majority of the groups were Hindu. There were only three Afghans.

It was a little nest of foreign iniquity. One Sikh with

a long kinky beard that looked evenly marcelled, like the pictures of Saul on a Sunday School card, wore a purple turban, a stiff-bosomed, full-dress shirt with the tail hanging over his bagging trousers.

The Sikhs one runs into everywhere — bright-eyed, intelligent, and alert to make a rupee honestly or dishonestly. The Sikh spoke English to me while Mirza Abdullah had dealings with an Afghan so unholy and bold that he risked both death and certain hell to supply with spirits the infidel and any of his compatriots who cared to fall from grace.

Mirza Abdullah said, 'Come on'.

I followed him and the Afghan into a dark, clay corridor. We went through it without a light and stopped at the end while the Afghan ducked through a low doorway into a small room. He lit a candle, we entered and sat down on a wooden bench. Abdullah said we were in a wholesale drug company's premises.

All the evil-smelling herbs from the far corners of Asia were here accumulated to be sold to the fakirs, who would administer them to trusting natives with results, generally speaking, as evil as the odours. Amanullah had tried to do away with these ignorant charlatans, but when his reign collapsed they continued operating without competition. There were only two qualified doctors in the nation.

The proprietor brought out two bottles, but I had lost interest in them. The excitement of the trip had left me pleasantly indifferent and fatigued.

The samples he brought were a bottle of brandy of a British Indian make and one bearing a one-star un-

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known French label; the Indian one sported five stars. The bootlegger had no whisky, only the lone bottle of the French liquor, and a single case of the Indian brandy. I bought half a dozen bottles — five of the brazenly labelled five-star and the French one-star.

Mirza Abdullah and I emptied our sagging pockets and there followed the tedious ordeal of counting out a thousand afghanis.

When we came out, the Sikh assured me that I would find the Indian brandy superior to any I had ever drunk, that it was rare at any price and that he had personally smuggled it into the country and would not be guilty of transporting anything but the finest.

I said dubiously that I hoped he was right.

He followed along by my side as we crossed the courtyard, and, in a silky tone, as if we two were kindred souls pitted against a gigantic conspiracy of Afghans, queried, 'How much did he charge you?'

'A thousand afghanis,' I replied.

'The thief! The dog!' he cried. 'I will bring you, on my next trip in, six bottles of that for two hundred and forty afghanis.'

I thanked him. 'I'll let you know,' I said.

We went into the black passage way, slipped through and began our creepy two-mile walk home. I wished that I had not met the Sikh. I would have enjoyed carrying my purchase and anticipating a drink before retiring. But he would sell me Indian brandy with an exquisite bouquet and fine old flavour for a dollar a bottle! This fact scarcely whetted my appetite for what I had bought so dear.

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We reached home safely, having successfully carried out our crime. No punishment awaited us, we thought, but Allah works in strange, devious ways his penalties to enforce.

I opened the brandy. Neither of us could drink it. Had we done so, there would have been no need for an executioner to push us off a wall.

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CHAPTER XII

MIRZA ABDULLAH had a friend, Mahmud Khan, who wallowed in a continual state of excitement about courtship and marriage. Sometimes he lent to his favourite subject the acroamatic intensity of a scholar at his thesis. At other times he indulged in the by-products of the erotic and fantastic learning he had acquired.

Mahmud Khan and I sat on the stairs leading up to the Palace of Daral Aman. It was the unfinished Capital. A little way down the hill was the empty city of Paghman, which King Amanullah had hoped would be an initial step towards Westernization but had turned out to be but a vaccination scar on the surface of the land.

For ten years Amanullah had attempted to convert his people from the restricted codes of old Islam to the doctrines of modern European civilization. He had failed. A bandit, Bacha Saquo, deposed him. Nadir Khan, the ruler on the throne at the time of our conversation, had taken the crown from the bandit, Bacha Saquo. Both of them had frowned upon the liberal reforms which Amanullah had tried to achieve. The home, marriage, courtship, dress — from the brief modernization that had coloured them during Amanullah's reign — all had reverted to old-time ways.

Mahmud Khan had been a diplomatic attaché in Amanullah's foreign ministry; for Bacha Saquo he had

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acted as interpreter; and for Nadir Khan he was a general handy man in dealing with foreigners, and the interpreter for all cases of the Afghan Supreme Court that involved aliens. He spoke French, Italian, Russian, German, and English equally well.

He might also be put down as the best dressed man in mid-Asia. He was hatless and wore a blue blazer and grey flannel trousers. In him the virus of Westernization had done its work. Steeped in the literature and thought of Europe, only an Asiatic's passive objectivity remained, tying him to the mystic futility of the sun-baked land where his flesh and habits had been bred.

'Young people in America,' he was saying, 'are they as the cinemas I saw in Paris picture them?'

He was veering towards his favourite subject — courtship and marriage — in which I think the personal phase, rather than the general social aspects, interested him. He had moved too far from native customs ever to return to them and be content. He represented a large group of young Afghan hybrids conditioned under two codes, who after a period of modernity in their youth had been cast back into the past.

In many silent harems in Kabul there were young women who, a few months before, had gone about unveiled, with well-founded hopes that they would live to try out a new and intriguing scheme of life. Though these hopes had been killed by revolution, the youth of the country was still fascinated by the glimpse they had had of strange emotional experiences

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in strange codes. These bitter young men and women had been forced to retreat into a past that had lost its infallibility for them.

And Mahmud Khan could not hear enough discussion of courtship and marriage in the Western manner.

'Is it true that the young generation in your country has changed since the World War? Or is that talk only another demonstration of America's way of dramatizing an ageless bit of behaviour because her attention has been called to its existence?'

I answered with disturbed, vague statements. Young people's behaviour had been exploited in films and fiction and magazine articles for a decade. More women had gone into business, become more independent and, with economic freedom, secured proportionate emotional freedom. Young people were much the same. These made the way clear for him to ask details of personal conduct.

'You were married since the war. How did you meet your wife for the first time? What did she say? What did you say? And what did you do? Did you kiss her before you proposed marriage to her?'

I interrupted his deluge of interrogations.

'You tell me about courtship and marriage in Afghanistan, and I will be better able to answer your questions by comparison.'

He threw up his hands. 'It is very terrible,' he cried. 'You should not even want to hear it; but listen if you will.

'The Afghan, according to the law of the Prophet,

may have four wives,' he began, and continued with sardonic digressions and exposition of the native customs of courtship and marriage that were such an obstacle to his own personal desires.

The business of acquiring these wives is a serious affair. A man may first marry at the age of fifteen or sixteen, while the bride may be only twelve or thirteen years of age.

Courtship is entirely in the hands of the parents of the couple. The mother of the boy calls round among her friends and looks over available daughters of marriageable age. Or there may be a match-maker, a 'social spy'. She is a person of wide acquaintance who pries into the homes of the town, searching out young girls for marriage.

When a desirable match is found, the parents of the prospective bride and groom have a tedious ordeal ahead of them. An Afghan proverb says, 'Parents of the groom must wear the soles of their shoes as thin as the skin of an onion calling upon parents of the bride.'

The truth of this proverb does not rest on the social inclinations of the parties. Many trips are necessary because an oriental bargain is being struck, and whether the subject of the trade is a sheep, a sword, or a woman, must be carried out in oriental fashion.

The parents of the bride boast of their daughter's virtue, beauty and charm; and fix a price upon her fully three times greater than they would be glad to settle for. The groom's family are melancholy, shake their heads, declare the prospective bride to have none of the virtues named, and to be, in fact, an unprece-

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dentedly disagreeable person and a liability which they consider assuming only out of the goodness of their hearts. They offer for the bride a nominal amount — many times less than they expect finally to settle upon. This, of course, varies in accordance with the wealth of the families, the desirability of the bride, her beauty and health.

No matter what the wealth of the family, the tax of the wedding is a strain upon it. Although a poor man's bride may be bought for ten dollars or a goat or a gun, the rich man sometimes pays many hundreds of dollars.

After a payment down is made and the date set for payment in full, the families report to the young people. The mother spends long evenings telling her son of the charms and beauty of his bride-to-be. The bounds of her imagination are the only limits to the virtues she ascribes to the bride. She misses no angle of appeal and makes it her purpose to keep the boy hot and bothered until the betrothal. In the meantime, the mother of the bride is going through a similar routine of praise for the boy.

Mahmud Khan insisted that during this period of the marriage arrangements parents become practised liars. The bride may be a wretched, sickly, sour little creature, evil to look upon and shrewish, but it does not restrain the match-makers from endowing her with the charms of a princess.

Then the affair gets under way. Small gifts are exchanged by the betrothed. First, handkerchiefs and sweetmeats. If the families be wealthy, there is a lavish betrothal ceremony, at which the older folks are

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again the principals. The bridegroom's parents bring expensive gifts to the bride — gaudy embroidered garments, shawls, golden-tipped shoes, rings, huge bracelets of silver that reach from the wrist to the elbow.

The invitations for this affair are sent out several months ahead of time. Written on red paper with golden ink, a poem of twenty or thirty couplets summons the guests. In these verses will be praise of Allah, the date and the place of the ceremony, and the names of the bridegroom's parents, the bridegroom, and the bride's parents. Only the name of the bride is omitted. Modesty dictates this.

At the betrothal rites, usually held in the summer time (the marriage is preferably in the winter), there is music and singing, sherbet to drink from crystal tumblers, trees hung with lanterns, soft cushions and rugs to rest upon. The bride-to-be, shrouded in her heavy veil, is present, and so is her prospective husband. But they do not see each other.

The father of the young man holds a tray, covered with red silk embroidered with gold. He places it at the feet of the young man's grandfather.

'Abdul Faiz has graciously consented to take my son as the slave of his daughter. On this tray I have loaf-sugar cones. By breaking one against the other their promise to wed will be sealed,' says the grandfather, breaking the sugar cones. And the young people are formally plighted.

At this ritual the bride and groom dye their nails and hands and toes with henna, and the bride seats

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herself in a room alone, with her back to the door and her face to a mirror. Her fiancé comes to the door and peers in as the girl drops her veil and exposes her face. In the mirror she glimpses her husband and through it, too, he learns for the first time whether his parents have misrepresented her beauty and attraction.

Then comes another series of observances preceding the great day. The families frequently exchange visits, carrying fruit and inexpensive gifts. At one of these parties the women guests gather in the harem for an interesting but painful ceremonial. They remove the superfluous hairs from the bride's face and body with silk cords and attempt to scrape off any other blemishes. Whether or not the bride has blemishes or superfluous hair, the ritual takes place just the same.

When the final payments are made and the last details of the business angle settled, the marriage is performed in keeping with the traditional shyness which is the Moslem woman's greatest virtue. The bride and groom still do not see each other.

A mullah calls upon the man and asks him whether he will marry the girl. His answer is a prompt, decisive, 'Yes'.

But three times the mullah calls upon the girl. First when asked, 'Will you marry this man?' she says, 'No'. The second time the question is put her reply is, 'Perhaps'. The third time the seduction through the priestly intermediary is achieved. She replies, 'Yes'.

Then two men, each representing one of the houses to

be united, call upon the couples with a similar catechism. Documents are read. The bride and bridegroom put their names and the impressions of their left thumbs on the contract. There are readings from the Koran, a short sermon, and the ladies go into the bride's room to see her unveil and drop coins at her feet.

The men set out with the bridegroom to his home, where they prepare for him the connubial bed. Then in tongas and sedan chairs a procession bearing the bride conveys her to her husband's home, where she must stay for three months without visiting her parents. At the end of this time she may see them only with her husband's consent.

'Tell me now,' Mahmud Kkan insisted, 'what did you say when you proposed to your wife? How did it feel to decide from a number of girls which one you wanted to marry?'

We sat together looking down the valley. Mahmud Khan was younger than I. He lived in a palace. He had travelled in Europe and Asia, he had slept with prostitutes and played with café girls but was unmarried and had had no love affair which met with his bookish notions of romance. His imagination had conditioned a vicarious sex experience for him, in conjuring up scenes in which he chose his own wife. Yet though he claimed that the mullahs were fools and that religion was for children and that the stilted reactionary life imposed by Nadir Khan upon the people was only temporary, he had not the courage to defy his father and search out a Moslem woman to his own liking.

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'I am ridiculous,' he apologized, 'but what can I do? I don't want to marry a foreigner. I want a chance, and so do my friends, to meet Afghan girls. We cannot manage it. If I do marry one chosen by our way, even though she is good and beautiful, I shall always think when I am with her that, should I have had a free choice, I would have had one even more lovely.'

It was a fantastic conversation I was having with this young prince on the stairs of an uncompleted palace, near an untenanted new city, all of it perched, a tiny dot of strange life, in the ancient hills. Just as the empty town was being engulfed by the dust of Asia, so were Mahmud Khan's disturbing new ideas being challenged by the waves of heritage and habit.

My own prosaic story must necessarily sound as strange to him as his did to me. But he begged that I tell it.

'I met her at a school party, and one afternoon we decided to be married. We had paddled in a canoe several miles up the river, brown and turbulent in the burst of spring; in it dipped pale green leaves of April. We pulled the craft ashore in the grove and spread a blanket. We had our school books with us. In one was the verse of Omar Khayyám. She read to me of "This checkerboard of nights and days".'

I was startled by the anomaly of Mahmud Khan's and my own respective positions. For Omar had walked beside his donkey over the same hill upon which we were now resting. Lying on the bank of a little stream in the Middle-West, I had heard his bitter-sweet philosophy. I had imagined then that

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both princes and poets in far-off lands lived lives of blissful perfection. But now I was telling my own story to a prince in a dead palace, with a dim caravan of camels undulating along a trail in the faded hills below. And the prince was watching an evening star come out and dreaming of the pastoral American setting of which I spoke, just as I had once dreamed of Asia.

We listened to one another's stories but interpreted them from mental standpoints that were poles apart. What seemed to me queer in this tale I let go unchallenged as typical of the oriental attitude to life. He on his side doubtless interpreted my pictures of western courtship and marriage in his own way, or he could never have convinced himself that he wanted to model his own existence after mine. I was idly letting further speculations go with the trite conclusion that the tenets of two such different civilizations could clearly never dwell in a single soul when Mahmud Khan, coming out of his reveries, his voice softly aggressive, said: 'But then you could have only one wife.'

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CHAPTER XIII

THROUGHOUT this fortnight, while Afghans and alien acquaintances alike were eagerly regaling me with facts and fancies, the better for me to know Afghanistan, the Independence Celebration was gaining momentum. Tens of thousands of tribesmen were dropping over the hills, on foot, by donkey, camel and motor lorry into Kabul for the festivities. They came, not as gullible provincials to leer at a fan dancer and self-righteously improve their half-knowledge by earnest momentary observations of dramatized half-facts. They came to town as cynical and belligerent critics, to see what the hell the new king was doing and whether the official programme that had been arranged could give them any entertainment that equalled the thrills, the skill and the daring of the rough sports that were their favourite pastime.

I had already met a certain Dr. Alvaro who had been imported as a principal attraction to amuse these rational sceptics. He took his mission to heart and referred to himself as an artist and to the show-business as a profession. Dr. Alvaro had carried his own magic show from Peiping — where he played opposition to Mei Lan Fang, and drew better houses, just outside Hataman Gate — to Mombassa, around to Capetown, then up along the Ivory Coast, where black men venerated him as a god.

In Casa Blanca he had performed before crowds of

desert men and soldiers of the French Legion. He had even had a fling at the London Alhambra, where he was certain it was only because of a crisis in imperial affairs that his Majesty King George was unable to witness his show. He was full of tales of performances he had given at the palaces of maharajas. He knew the crotchety ones, the sensuous and the stingy ones. He narrated how one gift of rupees he had received as a tip for entertaining an Indian prince's child had established him in a suite at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay. Here he built up a clientele of rich Parsees who made fortunes in following the advice he was able to give them by reading their palms. However, the depression had hit the maharajas, so he claimed, and he no longer cared to perform for the rabble. Therefore he had gladly obeyed a command from Nadir Khan to appear in Kabul.

He looked very like Kaiser Wilhelm in the days when the Kaiser was grooming himself to be War Lord. The doctor was proud of this resemblance, and assured me that in Singapore in 1912 he had caused considerable commotion by being mistaken for the German Emperor on tour *incognito*.

He was about five feet four inches in height, with stiff black hair and a beetle brow; his moustache had been carefully waxed into perpendicular needle-points. He swaggered, and he was vain. He showed me clippings in which his newspaper at home had criticized him for denying his race and accepting the status of a sun-tanned European whenever it was accorded to him.

The clipping was from a Surat paper edited by an

Indian and published in English. Dr. Alvaro told me he had written what he termed a reply nothing less than scathing, which was never published. In it he maintained that were the editor himself not over-impressed by Europeans, he would never have learned English nor published his paper in that language. On the expatriate point the doctor was sensitive.

Dr. Alvaro was now the Afghan king's own magician, and wore, engraved on a wrist-watch, metallic testimony to this effect. The watch was self-winding. This the Doctor usually explained by saying that sweat performed the miracle, and that perpetual motion would ensue if he could but sweat without interruption.

The good doctor was not only a magician, he was also author, astrologer, and mathematician. He used his astrological knowledge to cast horoscopes which seemed to be well-nigh infallible in their prophetic attributes. I believe he was sincere in his notion that he could forecast major tragedies and minor joys to the dot, for he spent one full hot afternoon casting for me a dubious future. It took him a long time to complete, he said, because he wanted no ragged edges. There was no sense in my going on in the dark when he could, by concentration, show me the way.

His considerable skill in mathematics he had used in working out a formula, explained with many diagrams and vignettes in his book, *How to Win at the Races*. Here, by the science of numbers and calling upon the stars to corroborate some few weak contentions, he had set forth a guide designed to send all bookmakers

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forthwith to the workhouse. He explained his treatise to me. No man before himself had ever noted the significance of the horse's number or correlated this item with the birthday of the animal. By starting from these two significant figures and doing a little multiplication, using as the multiplier the number of the race and the horse's place at the post, he arrived at what he assured me were infallible predictions.

In short, the good Doctor's legerdemain, though it was his chief means of livelihood, was not his real pride. Yet he was obviously sincere when he declared, 'I am first and last a trouper, a showman!'

I am willing to concede all of the spirit of comradeship with which he endowed the word. Doctor Alvaro's concept of a trouper involved no small measure of kindliness. 'For a trouper gives and takes,' he added. He proved it to me in an amazing way.

I am accustomed to the suspicion with which travellers in the far corners of the world look upon any fellow-wanderer who indicates he is running low on funds. I myself harbour a deeply-rooted and active suspicion toward talkative paupers who will not stay at home. But Doctor Alvaro, despite his adventures up and down the world, stood faithfully by the code to which he believed all troupers should subscribe, and he shall for ever be listed with me as a friend.

My ready funds had run low, and I was now using drafts which I had bought at a bank in Teheran which had no correspondent nearer than Bombay. The lowest amount of these highly adorned cheques which I had was forty pounds sterling. Since there were no

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banks in Afghanistan, I could not cash them. I could have gone to the foreign office and asked a favour of the Foreign Minister, but I did not want to do that if I could avoid it.

Dr. Alvaro was showing me his latest trick, one in which he tore up rupee notes and made them whole again. It reminded me of my financial plight, which I explained to him. He ceased his magical manipulations, pulled out his wallet and counted out four hundred rupees. 'Take these', he said.

I endorsed one of my drafts and handed it to him.

'No, no,' he said. 'I'll have as much trouble cashing it as you would have. When you reach Bombay, just leave the money at the hotel desk for me. They all know me there. I'll get it all right.'

When I insisted that he take the draft, he refused. 'Leave it in Bombay,' he repeated. 'One trouper always helps another.'

It was on that same night that Dr. Alvaro staged for the crowds in Kabul his 'stupendous, hypnotic, mystifying galaxy of the supernatural' and fell into disgrace.

I had come early for the entertainment. My pass admitted me to his Majesty's parterre. I took an end seat in the front row. The chairs in the rear were filled with chieftains, army officers, and courtiers. I sat with the Minister of Transportation, whose chief concern at the time was the purchase of five hundred motor cars for the army, and the incidental graft which he was to pocket when the contract was signed. We were talking of motor cars, not their efficiency but the price.

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The seats below were filled with stoical tribal warriors. Suddenly the soldiers at the entrance to the box came to attention, presented arms, while a lone man walked between them, passed me, and strode to a seat at the other end of the first row. His white linen turban was as compact as a silk hat. He wore a grey-black linen tunic that fell half way between his ankles and his knees. It was belted with a plain leather strap, and a sheathed dirk having a handle encrusted with pearls and diamonds was stuck in the exact middle. His polished boots turned up at heel and toe made him look as if he rode on stubby rockers. Despite his puffy frame, he walked with fine dignity. His face was startling; high forehead, a strong, bulbous nose, and closely cropped iron-grey beard that seemed to cover his cheek bones and make, with his heavy black brows, a nest for two small eyes sharp as needle points. Without looking to the right or to the left he took a seat and stared straight ahead.

'Who,' I asked my companion, 'is that?'

'That man,' he said, 'ten years ago was one of the two richest men in all the world. Only the Nizam of Hyderabad was ever reputed to possess more chests full of jewels and gold than he. And no man of the last century has held in his hands or exercised the absolute power of life and death over so many people. He was, until the Russian revolution, the Amir of Bokhara. Since 1300, when Jenghiz Khan let go of his land, his ancestors had been busy amassing the wealth and power he inherited. At the revolution, he escaped with his life and three motor cars laden with precious

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stones. Now he does not have more than six million pounds. He is setting his sons up in business as silk and cotton merchants. He thinks that the empires of today must be those of traders, and he wants his offspring to be princes still.'

I wondered what a man like that must feel, having been reduced from a kingdom, three hundred wives, and a heritage he believed God-given, to walk alone to Dr. Alvaro's magic show, like a clerk going to the pictures. I asked the question of the Afghan at my side. What with language difficulties, general queries are not always clear. But I got the answer.

'He wonders who you are,' he replied. 'He says he has seen you daily in your garden. He has been told that you are an American, and says he wants to talk with an American.'

Thus I learned that even kings can be curious about new neighbours. This thought somehow made it easier for me to take philosophically my friend Dr. Alvaro's fall from power that same evening. But the expression on the good doctor's face when it actually occurred I shall always remember.

His act was to have been the big feature of the celebrations. But alas, he had to work on a round stage with the audience encircling it — a situation to strike terror in the soul even of a royal magician. This stage was bordered with barbed wire in lieu of footlights. The unhappy magician told me that never in all his life had he been put to such a test. And indeed, in that impossible situation, his skill and his self-confidence alike deserted him. He gave a dismal performance,

and the audience made no bones about their contempt for him.

The stern brave lines etched on his countenance through a lifetime suddenly vanished, leaving only a look of bewilderment and pain, like that on the face of a little girl who has forgotten her piece just as she was going to score a declamatory victory over an audience of all the people who had ever troubled her. His belligerently debonair moustache seemed to wilt, the square erectness of his shoulders collapsed into a despondent droop. Surrounded by the tinsel and painted trappings of his faltering magic, he visibly shrivelled and became as limp as the little silk flags he was still valiantly producing from his nose.

So complete a fiasco did his show prove that a young Afghan magician was ordered, while Dr. Alvaro's performance was still going on, to do the rope-trick in the King's box, while the doctor looked on helplessly from the stage and the entire audience witnessed his humiliation.

The rest of the programme that followed turned out to be a sort of human Punch and Judy show. I could make little of this weird pantomime. The characters taking part in it were two-story affairs — long grotesque figures composed of one performer atop of another, the whole shrouded in a long gown. The slapstick comedy they indulged in proved very popular with the carnival crowds.

A double-decker witch with straggling hair and a grotesque mask, carrying a long bamboo staff, was distinctly the star of the evening. To the tune of weird

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string instruments, plus an accordion and hand-thumped drums, she whacked indiscriminately everyone who came in her way, while other gigantic figures with inordinately short arms clapped their hands and wagged the great masks on their heads that represented elephants, donkeys, or leering beggars. There did not seem to me to be much plot to their antics, and there was no dialogue, but a quite clever Mongolian-featured master of ceremonies strode about, like a dwarf in a dress suit among the tall freakish performers, and kept up a sort of monologue which explained or commented on their antics.

The evening's entertainment altogether was pretty poor. Even the Afghans, to me, all looked rather bored. As for the doughty tribesmen, any group of whom can fall into line and do a swaying number to the beat of a thick-skinned drum, all of them looked on the antics of the imported mummers on stilts with hardly concealed contempt. It was probably as well that they had left their guns at the door on the way in.

It was a very different reception that the same audience gave to the mountain games a day or so after Dr. Alvaro's debacle. Seated in a natural amphitheatre in the hills, their hundred thousand brown faces before the games started were lit with genuine anticipation, and during the game reflected the barbaric excitement of the spectacle they witnessed.

I never did discover what the game was called. Always when I found time to ask, 'What is its name?' the conversation was lost in the excitement of the

sport. There was little ceremony about starting. No expounding was needed for this audience which knew exactly what to expect.

I have often gone to polo matches. Although I can't play and do not greatly enjoy watching the game, the ritual of preparations for an afternoon of it are always interesting. None of the picturesque formalities of a polo match precede the Afghan game, which in its speed and roughness makes polo look like vicarage garden-party tennis.

We had driven perhaps ten miles beyond the gates of Kabul into the mountains. The narrow road had been jammed with men on their way to the games, a fleecy trail of white turbans and flapping pantaloons, streaked with bright red, green and blue vests and capes. Little boys stumbled behind their striding fathers, their turbans as big as the men's, making them look like gnomes in a Bagdad parade.

Donkeys and camels ambled with the men. I guessed that they were being taken along because there was no place at home to tie them up, and, mysteriously, Afghan tribesmen led their horses instead of riding them.

The playing field was a long valley. Its bottom was a level, flat stretch, probably three miles long and a half-mile wide. The sides of it were steep, rocky and sandy. One end of it was plastered with Afghans. Perched precariously half way up the steep bank was a silken tent, and in the tent were spread carpets and soft upholstered chairs. It was the king's marquee.

Directly below it on the valley floor was a circle of

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white rock, three feet in diameter. This was the goal. There were no bands or music of any sort. No one was hawking balloons or pennants or scorecards. The only extraneous item was a military ambulance which the British Legation had sent either out of the goodness of their hearts or to give their ambulance surgeon some exercise. Besides this, there were only the men of the mountains awaiting a contest that suited their idea of amusement.

In the lower end of the valley mounted men began to gather. They sat their horses in groups of eight or ten, each group representing a tribe. A matter of five hundred of them altogether. Finally a small cavalcade of motors came up the trail and the king, his court, and the diplomatic corps in frock coats filed into the tent. Their sartorial perfection made an ugly blur on the natural scene. The only touches of native glamour in the royal tent were added by a few chieftains in soft felt robes, and the Minister of War, the king's brother, his uniform tailored in the European fashion: his costume was completed by golden earrings. He was to have a part in the game, for no one less than the Minister of War could be final umpire in what followed.

No bugle called the horsemen to their posts. Suddenly the half thousand tribesmen came cantering up the valley toward the spot of white on the golden sand.

It was a thrilling enough start, for the Afghan sits a horse as riders in a horse show aspire to do. I have seen them drop down embankments that a news-reel cameraman would come a hundred miles to see them

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negotiate, and climb another steep slope like a mountain goat, all with the indifference of a débutante and her groom in Rotten Row. Their mounts are wiry animals about the size of a cowboy's pony, and with a mustang's universal interest in anything about which he can kick up a fuss.

The host of riders pulled up before the royal tent, a quivering mass of multi-coloured horseflesh, cotton cloth, white teeth, and brown faces. The object of the game was to race two miles up the valley to where a freshly killed goat, weighing from ninety to a hundred pounds, had been laid on a knoll, fetch it back and drop it on the spot of white rock below the king's marquee. The man who did this would receive his reward from the king's own hands.

There was a tense stamping of horses. The crowds on the hillside were breathlessly still. No flag dropped. I heard only a shrill, oriental cry in the silence, then a thunder of hoofs. Without lanes and without order, at breakneck speed, the army of horsemen raced up the valley.

The rumble of hoof-beats faded into a murmur. Then, at the far end of the course there was jumbled confusion, a moment of stillness, someone was picking up the goat, then the roar of the charge returning. For brief seconds they would stop as if stricken with mass paralysis, when the goat was dropped by one rider and fought for by the rest. On at a furious pace, then checking, milling around, and again the onrush. In the wake of the main body were Afghans strewn on the ground and riderless horses, still excited by the

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chase, galloping madly in all directions. Turbans were unwound and flying, beards blown frantically apart, and hoarse cries rose above the crash of hooves.

I was sitting in the king's marquee, looking down on the battered horde, aware only that something had gone wrong. The goat, bleeding, was deposited by a bleeding rider on the white stones, but all the horsemen were in an uproar and the apparent victor was shouting and gesticulating, a lost voice in the shouting of his competitors.

The entire audience broke forth in hoots and cries. Though I could understand no word, it was undeniably the uproar of a crowd denouncing poor sportsmanship.

The Minister of War rose from his leather chair, cried an unheard command to the mounted mob, clambered down the hillside and thrust his way into their midst. It seemed that the winner was accused of cheating. He had a hook on his saddle on which he had hung the goat. Contestants who had the carcase in their hands could hold on to it for only a moment because the weight of it pulled them sideways and other grabbing riders dismounted them as they hauled at it. But the winner had come a hundred yards without being unbalanced and no one had taken the goat away from him.

It was finally announced that the race was to be run over again, but now another riot broke out. I could see the Minister of War arguing and flinging his arms about in the fresh altercation. The cause of it was eventually explained to me. The king's brother had

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ruled that the cheating victor could not play again, but the members of his tribe would have none of that decision.

Again the horses lined up with the offender jockeying for a place. It had been determined, I assume, that by not having his victory recognized, the cheating winner had been penalized enough for his ingenuity.

The stampede to the end of the valley was repeated. On the return journey one horseman, thrown from his mount, lay stunned. The ambulance surgeon, followed by two stretcher bearers, rushed on the field to him. The goat had been dropped not twenty yards away and the rest of the horsemen were crowding after it as medical aid reached the fallen player. He was laid upon the stretcher. As it was lifted, he sat upright, realized he was no longer on his horse, leaped off the stretcher, snatched a riderless horse, mounted it, and was back in the mob, while the agents of mercy, bewildered, ran for their lives with the pack bearing down on them.

A particularly tough-looking Afghan with a blue-black beard was leading, half off his horse, clinging to the goat with one hand, his reins in the other. He raced up the side of the almost perpendicular valley, his panting horse scrambling for a foothold, but his end run against gravity did not deflect the others. A hundred of them mounted the embankment after him — horses, men, and the goat tumbled into a heap. No wireless announcer could possibly have called the next moves. The man with the blue-black beard finally emerged with the goat, did some broken-field running,

and turbanless and torn, his eye bleeding, dropped the goat on the goal.

I watched the faces on the hillside. It seemed as if the mass of sand and rock had come to life, they were all excited and dancing, but there was no cheering.

At the goal there was much confused movement of horses and men, and out of them, winding his turban as he came, the winner emerged, and climbed the steep slope to the king's marquee. The angle of the ground as it approached the tent was almost perpendicular. As amazing as his horsemanship was the fashion in which he managed to kneel on the steep incline.

The king went to the edge of the little precipice and two attendants brought two sacks of silver. They handed them to the king while the horseman bowed low and pulled his beard again and again. Then he reached up both hands, took his reward, and in one sweeping movement ran down the bank, took to his horse and galloped after the retreating horde of tribesmen.

At the far end of the valley I could see them pushing around the victor to hear how his Majesty looked at so close a range and how heavy the sacks of coins were.

We chatted in the marquee over a final cup of tea, discussing the decision that let the first winner play again.

Fallen horsemen were still wandering down the valley holding broken bones together.

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PART TWO

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CHAPTER I

AFTER two weeks Kabul would have become dull had it not been for the story which lay on the surface of the recent ruins. Men who had helped make the bizarre history of Afghanistan in the last few years were still on hand to tell their tales. Seven kings had sat upon the throne since 1919. Six had reigned since 1929. Three had fled, three met violent deaths, and the seventh, at the time of writing, still rules. Much blood had been shed and countless intrigues woven. Old had clashed with new in a futile, glamorous struggle. A trio of kings played their parts with sound and fury — fantastic characters of a story-teller's imagination — each in his own peculiar way forgotten by the western world. The strange, bloody events had occurred so recently that they might still be news.

In Kabul on every tongue three names were ever present:

Amanullah, the king who tried to win his people to new ways of life.

Bacha Saquo, whose tale is that of a bandit who made himself monarch.

Nadir Khan, the scholarly general who ruled out the new ways, tried to recapture the past, and died from a bullet fired by an adolescent boy.

It seemed to me that no adventure could be as exciting as trying to piece together the story of the three kings as it still floated around Kabul, a story that gave

meaning to its streets and buildings and cast glamour around the men I met. I therefore spent most of my time in Kabul gathering together all I could get of recent history. In reporting it, I tell the story as I heard it from King, Crown Prince, Prime Minister, diplomats, merchants, and servants.

There are deer, mountain goats, and grouse in the golden hills between Kabul and Jalalabad.

Amir Habibullah of Afghanistan, a black-bearded man with dark, beady eyes, was motoring from his capital to Jalalabad on February 19th, 1919. 'Why not have a day's shooting in the hills before going on to review troops and confer with tribal chieftains in the eastern city?' he thought.

The car lurched around a bend of the rocky trail. Far up the opposite mountain he saw a lonely house of baked clay, a cube of gold against the snow. He gave orders to camp there.

He rode in silence. With him were his two oldest sons, his brother, and a slight man on the sunny side of forty — Nadir Khan, his beard cropped curtly to a point, dressed in the khaki uniform of a general, and, all unsuspected by his companions, with a sceptre in his knapsack and his star in the ascendant.

No one talked as his Highness's car jolted up the narrow road. All was not well with the Amir.

Young Afghans, with youth's idealism fanning the flame of independence which blazes eternally in these mountains, suspected their Amir of treachery. They did not understand his pacific acceptance of British

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control of the government's major policies. Proclamations posted in the bazaar of Kabul, uttering vague explanations, had been coolly received. There were meetings at night behind walls where young patriots huddled around charcoal fires, passed around chillums, drank tea, and whispered treason. Were they caught, cannons would boom for them. But on the echo their souls would ride to Allah.

Amir Habibullah had good reason to meditate. A few days earlier he had been riding behind his four black horses in the state carriage. Quiet crowds parted to let him pass. Gay draperies of cotton prints flapped in the breeze before the shops of cloth vendors. Silent, turbanned men in their marts squatted amid heaps of soft rugs to watch him pass. There was the staccato tattoo of silversmiths hammering metal. Then the crack of a rifle, a moment of paralysed silence that comes when tragedy is near, the release of the tension, screams, excited chatter, confused rushing to and fro. A bullet had grazed the Amir's uniform and embedded itself in the carriage seat.

'A deranged fanatic,' the Amir said to himself. He wished he could have believed it.

But now at the hunters' camp ahead, surrounded by all his sons but one — Amanullah, the youngest, as Governor of Kabul, was in the capital — there would surely be relief from the sullen pressure of the town. Guarded by his trusted generals, all relatives, there would be safety.

The Amir's tent was pitched. The greasy smoke of mutton roasting on spits hung over the camp as the

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Amir rose from his dinner, waddled into the tent and fell asleep on a carpeted bed. Four guards stood at the four corners of the royal tent. A fifth guard was at the entrance.

Sleep, in the high, thin air of Asia's mountains, is heavy and satisfying. Monarch or beggar, after a day on tortuous roads, finds it blessed, and the Amir slept soundly.

At three o'clock a fusillade of shots brought the camp to life. The shots came from the Amir's tent. Everyone rushed to it. They found Habibullah still apparently sleeping. A spot of red was on the carpet by his head, and a tiny hole of scarlet in his temple.

As the flaps of the tent were pulled aside to carry out the body of Amir Habibullah, it was as though a curtain also parted to let Afghanistan for a decade look furtively on to the outside world. The glance was to be brief, its beginning and its end clouded with blood.

Immediately upon Habibullah's death two members of his retinue both declared themselves Amir: his brother and his oldest son. Their timing was wrong, and they reckoned without two important requisites to the ruling of Afghanistan — the army and the capital. Kabul is the king-maker and the army his power.

Young Amanullah, swarthy, dapper, and full of strange, new notions, was only a third son, but he was Governor of Kabul and the army was at his command.

The Amir's brother, Masrullah, was the first to announce himself Amir. His nephew Inayatullah

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countered quickly with his own proclamation. While he, at Jalalabad, was busy crowding his uncle off an imaginary throne, the second son, Hidayatullah, was hot-footing it to the capital. He knew how such things should be done. But his motor broke down in the hills, leaving him stranded with no one near by to whom he could proclaim his place in the sun.

In the meantime the third son Amanullah, at Kabul, called together the army and talked to it in terms it understood. Prodigally he issued new commissions and, best of all, not only paid the army up to date but promised it an advance in salary.

His black eyes filled with tears as he stood before his troops. 'My father was your father,' he said. 'He has been done to death by a coward. His murder has not been avenged. The name of the culprit is not even known. And what does my uncle do? With the shadow of the unpunished murder of his brother still hanging over him, he proclaims himself king. Do Afghans recognize that as the true mark of kingship — the way of a warrior?'

Tears streamed down the prince's cheeks. He broke into a sob, and, drawing his sword, he held it aloft and cried: 'Not until the murderer of my father has been brought to justice will I sheathe this sword. What is the verdict of this nation, whose slave I am? What is its decree?' He turned his tear-wet face up to the poised sabre and waited for the answer.

It thundered from the troops in a single voice. 'Thy father was our benefactor, our lord. Like thee we shall fight to avenge the wrong. Thy honour is our honour,

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our beloved prince. Nay, no longer prince. You are our king!'

Then and there Amanullah bowed to the will of the nation.

But even while Amanullah heard the cheers, his future nemesis was approaching. Nadir Khan, the small, scholarly general who had been one of those who rushed to the bed of the dead monarch, must that very day have vowed towards him an enmity that was to bring Amanullah's rule to disaster and himself eventually to the throne. For Nadir Khan and the king's uncle Masrullah were brought to Kabul in chains. No connection with the death of Habibullah could be proved. It was the officers and the guard of the deceased king who finally paid the penalty for the murder. They were all shot.

Three months later Nadir Khan had even risen from the infamy of his manacles to be commander-in-chief of Amanullah's army. Yet the post was his not because of any friendship between the general and the new Amir, but because Nadir Khan was popular with the army and the nation's most adroit soldier. Amanullah's concession to him had in it both good politics and good sense.

Nadir Khan, schooled in the ancient traditions and steeped in the religion of the land, could never see eye to eye with the new king. Amanullah had read books about the Western world. He had fifty-six automobiles of European make. He liked to drive them as fast as the ragged roads of his land would permit. Amanullah, in his Rolls-Royce, must have dreamed of

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Photo: E.N.A.

AMANULLAH KHAN

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the day when he might build highways that would allow him to find out just what the car could do. He liked to talk long hours to foreign guests. Modern Turkey interested him. So, too, did the big store catalogues. Some day there would be standardized knick-knacks for all the Afghans if he had his way.

'But as for Great Britain — enough of them, with their bony ambassadors riding up from their elegant embassy to my palace with orders for the ruler of the Afghans,' he said. There should be no more of this addressing Amanullah as His Highness the Amir. His Majesty the King — that was to be the title.

The age-old game of playing Russia against Great Britain when Great Britain became too powerful, and of playing Great Britain against Russia when the bear from the north was ready to gorge a bit — he would try that. England had had her day. Now it was Russia's turn. He would smile on the Soviets. They were safer. They had trouble enough at home making a new Red world. They would not be an immediate danger, and they might be a help.

He might perhaps begin by a nice appeal to Great Britain, a sort of fair-play theme that he had understood went well with the English. Hadn't Afghanistan stood by during the World War and not joined with Germany, even though Germany had promised her millions of marks, hundreds of thousands of guns and thousands of cannon? In fact, hadn't Germany promised them everything they had asked for? And yet Afghanistan did not harass India. It might have been because the Germans never delivered and could

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not have delivered, had they wanted to, the fabulous goods they promised.

Nevertheless, in a pleasant note addressed to the Viceroy of India a few days after his accession to the throne, Amanullah recalled Afghan favours during the war. The wording of the note, couched in friendly terms, advised the Viceroy of Habibullah's death, referred to Amanullah as His Majesty, and suggested that he was ready and prepared to make agreements and treaties with the mighty government of England. It meant, in short, that Afghanistan was to be independent of the British Empire.

The country's independence had actually been limited hitherto only by the provisions of a treaty which obliged the Afghan monarchs to submit their foreign policy to Great Britain for approval. However, with this curtailment of his absolute power the ruler did not rank as His Majesty the King — merely His Highness the Amir.

The Viceroy of India did not answer the note for many weeks. That was a snub. Then the tardy reply ignored the spirit of Amanullah's letter. Commercial treaties they would like to talk about. No mention was made of political agreements.

Afghan armies marched toward the Khyber Pass. England was tired of war. She was having trouble in keeping enough English troops in India to prevent the ferment of rebellion from bubbling over. There had been riots at Lahore, Delhi, and Peshawar.

Nadir Khan, Amanullah's marshal, led the Afghan warriors to victory. Amanullah became His Majesty

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and began his race for modernization. He now had to confront religious and social prejudices, skirt unseen intrigue, and control a chaotic family. His domestic troubles crystallized first.

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CHAPTER II

THE queen mother was fretting. Masculine exercises, affairs of state and such, were thereupon relegated to their appropriate place in the cosmic scheme. Mother was indulging in her choicest prerogative. Her son might be king of the Afghans, but the matriarch ruled in the intimate realm of the household. Here were decisions to be made that had reality. If all the words spoken on this subject had been heaped together, they would have made a pile far higher and more fraught with danger than all the syllables ever uttered on empires and government. The queen mother had a marriageable daughter and was on the lookout for a mate for the girl.

The lethargic life of the harem never confuses the purpose of women with extraneous things. When they are young, they have only one function, love and breeding; when they are old, their obsession transfers itself to their female offspring.

The queen mother looked — so the story goes — with favour upon a young prince, a cousin whose ambitions ran the whole gamut of love and power. Hashim Khan was his name. His brother, Nadir Khan, marshal of Afghanistan's victorious armies, had by now been dispatched to France by Amanullah as Afghan ambassador, and so put out of the way. This left Amanullah free to carry on the reforms that sent

shivers of rage up and down the orthodox spine of the military hero.

Nadir Khan, who was later to seize the crown that Amanullah had worn, was eating humble pie in Paris, cut off from the power he had with the king's army, and suffering all the humiliation the king could impose on him by secret instructions to subordinates in the embassy to cross their chief at every point, with assurance that they and not he would be upheld by Amanullah.

Hashim Khan represented his brother's influence at home, and Amanullah eyed him with suspicion.

Hashim Khan was very tall and strong. He had a high, sloping forehead, a long, straight nose, and a firm mouth, which his closely cropped moustache and goatee did not hide. The blood of a long line of Durani chieftains flowed in his veins. Some of it was royal. He was a cousin of the king. Hashim Khan was a poor man, and marrying a royal princess would be an expensive business.

Amanullah, busy with affairs of state and not yet appreciating the potential threat that the brilliant, fearless Hashim Khan was to the throne, gave the romance between the statesman and his sister approval by letting it go on without objection.

Also, a royal love-match precludes the chattel-like bargaining which brings about marriages in an orthodox Islamic country. Amanullah could not object on that score. This projected alliance might be an example of the new freedom which he wanted his people to accept. Though Hashim Khan was no

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endorser of his Majesty's radical plans, he could set aside his conservative prejudices where personal passion was concerned.

Several times the romance came near to marriage. The court predicted at frequent intervals a wedding in the near future. But it did not occur. Hashim Khan stoutly declared that only when more power and wealth were his would he take the royal lady for his wife. And while he waited, strange forces were busy.

A young man, a nobody, came to court as an attaché. He had youth, a fine body, immaculate clothes, and a gracious smile. His laughing eyes could not conceal the hard glitter which simmers beneath the *bonhomie* of a born parasite. This youngster had come to Kabul to make his fortune by what means he could. He was without ability as a soldier and untrained as a statesman. But he had a flexible moral code which bowed easily to expediency. He was a handsome addition to the king's galaxy of young men. Amanullah appeared fascinated by his company on the golf course, at tennis, and on long drives through the hills in a closed motor.

There was not much excuse for the king's adding new youths to the household. People were already beginning to talk.

The newcomer met the Princess. She was beautiful. She had a freedom of manner and an independence he had never seen in the cloistered womenfolk of his own household. In her strange, modern way she had the glamour of a courtesan and virgin in one.

The princess was wholly in love with Hashim Khan, but Hashim Khan had work to do and could not play

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around the court. Playing was the business of this new young fellow, and he made it a real business. There was no security for him if his future at Kabul were to be tied to the evanescent fancies of Amanullah. He knew that.

'If I can,' he thought, 'insure myself against the day when younger men, better tennis players with new faces, come along to supplant me, I will do it.'

The time to strike for this security was while the favour of the king shone upon him. He put his proposition bluntly to Amanullah.

'If I am to stay in your court another day,' he said, 'I must have your promise to let me marry your sister.'

Amanullah agreed. Here was a chance for the king to kill two birds with one stone. Hashim Khan was the brother of Nadir Khan. Although Amanullah was rid of the marshal, he had begun to feel the power of the young brother who represented the exiled Nadir Khan's interests in the capital.

The queen mother would have none of it.

Odd stories are rampant in Kabul, which eternally sizzles with gossip and intrigue; and I tell this incident because it was repeated to me many times, once by a high officer of the cabinet.

Put Hashim Khan out of the way — that was Amanullah's solution. It would remove a political threat and leave a clear field for the sister's lover, of whom he approved. The king appointed Hashim Khan as Afghan ambassador to Soviet Russia. Reluctantly Hashim went to Moscow.

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He had been there but a short time when experiences similar to those his brother, Nadir, had had in Paris befell him. There was insubordination among his staff. In an argument, one of his legation attachés took a shot at him; the aim missed Hashim but hit a stenographer. There was some considerable ado about it.

Hashim resigned his post. Amanullah ordered him to Teheran to head the Afghan embassy there. Hashim refused to go. Instead, he went to France, where he joined his brother.

In the meantime at the palace a first-class family row was under way. The common gossip of officials in Kabul while I was there had it that Amanullah even threatened his mother with a revolver, insisting that she endorse the handsome young courtier's suit for her daughter's hand. It was of no avail, and so the story goes that Amanullah had recourse to intrigue.

He put his sister in a room alone with the friend he wanted her to marry, locked the door, and then sent out an alarm that brought his mother and the palace guard flying. The door was broken down. All witnessed the infamy of an Afghan maiden defying the Mohammedan law.

The king got his way. His sister immediately married the young courtier, and more salt was thus added to the wounded feelings of the brothers Nadir and Hashim Khan.

Family affairs temporarily settled to his satisfaction, Amanullah turned his energies to his schemes for modernization. But even more complex than domestic

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intrigue were the factors that worked in the dark to thwart his new deal.

Let us picture a day at court when Amanullah fondly believed that a modern millennium was in the making, by his own contrivance.

His Majesty Amanullah Khan's racquet drives the ball like a shot to the edge of the opposite court, a puff of yellow dust. His opponent swings and misses. His Majesty has won another set. Throwing a blue flannel jacket over his sweating shoulders, he walks from the tennis court across the velvety lawn towards the palace. He is a pace ahead of half a dozen soft-voiced young men in white, who giggle while discussing his Majesty's victory.

Amanullah enjoys the company of his boyish courtiers, dressed in the immaculate European wear that is the order of the day. When they put on their native garb, it is of the softest linens; their turbans are of silk; their eyes are carefully mascaraed; behind their ears hang red roses.

Now play for the morning is over. Sterner men wait in the king's ante-chamber to be heard. At the vast mahogany desk, in a trim business suit of grey serge, the king skims through reports.

Report from the Minister of Education: 'Five new schools opened in Herat.'

Dispatches from his legations: 'Conversations with the Krupp Company are progressing satisfactorily. His Majesty's offer for the establishment of a munitions plant at Kabul is receiving serious attention.'

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From Czechoslovakia: 'Credits for the arms shipment cannot be further extended.'

From Moscow: 'His Excellency, the Commissar of Foreign Affairs, expresses his highest esteem and unparalleled gratitude for your Majesty's favours.'

Reports from spies: 'Imbrai cannot be trusted. He meets with officers of your Majesty's guard in a tea house in Jalalabad.'

The communication from the legation of the German Republic requests an audience for Herr Riker. Herr Riker talks about payments overdue on the new palace.

There is the daily report from the Treasury. Why worry? Taxes are coming in, and all Habibullah's personal fortune is still untouched. The mullahs dare not speak openly. Amanullah is the hero of Afghan independence. Let the Czechoslovakians worry. Russia will sell arms on long credit. It is 1927. The world is rich and booming, and Afghanistan and Amanullah will have their share.

He glances at a jewelled watch on his brown wrist. It is time to meet his advisers. They are waiting for him now in a council room on the other side of the palace, seated in a great, high-ceilinged room hung with paintings.

The paintings are framed in the approved manner of palaces, with deep, ornate, gilded frames, and the wall is covered with them. But the pictures are no Rembrandts, Corots, or Van Eycks. They are a brazen gauge of the degree of Afghanistan's Europeanization. One represents an ocean liner sailing a choppy sea.

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From one side of the thick frame to the other it looks suspiciously like an earnest art student's copy of a steamship advertisement. Another is a pastoral scene of the English countryside — executed, no doubt, by one of those tidy, virginal old ladies who set up their easels by the roadside when spring comes.

They are not much as paintings go, but the men at the council table in their western morning clothes approve of them. They are a more fitting decoration than soft, ancient rugs for a chamber in which all discussions are of western things.

King Amanullah walks briskly across the balcony that overlooks the marble rotunda of the palace. A long row of stuffed elephants' feet adapted for stools lines his way. As he passes, petitioners awaiting an audience rise from the ingenious stools and salaam. There is a goodly number of old men with orange or white beards — patriarchs wrapped in thick, white felt capes, topped with gay turbans. But Amanullah, young, muscular, and curt, has not time for septuagenarians. They cannot understand the young king. To them he is one of three things — a fool, an infidel, or a knave. Amanullah is oblivious of them.

He enters the court chamber. There is no hand-on-the-heart-bowing, nor the time-honoured, ornate greeting, 'May your Majesty's shadow never grow less.'

Such ancient formalities would clash with the tenor of the meeting and would also carry the inference that the power-drunk ego of Amanullah Khan could momentarily shrink a millimetre with the polite pretence of meekness.

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Better be up to date — the king's councillors know that. The perennial relationship between underlings and the boss governs the ministers.

There is Sher Ahmad Khan. He is going to be the president of the new dummy parliament. Were it not for the tautness of a panther in his movements and its savage ferocity in his eyes, his fattening body and sonorous voice would make him seem pompous. He is Amanullah's cousin and is to be his last Prime Minister. He likes the king's plans for the nation and wants to take part in them because he is vain and enjoys the use of power which enables him to do shocking and unusual things.

And there is Wali Khan, high up in the council — a fat little man, black hair parted in the middle and dancing, hard eyes. Amanullah, so far as Wali is concerned, can do no wrong. For Wali sees in each move of modernization which he can encourage the king to make, a craftily placed feather in a nest he envisages for himself. He sees a future gleaming with gold and castles, railways and mines and a busy, prosperous nation — all for himself. He is to be acting king; and he is preparing for the day and laying plans to make the job permanent.

Around the table are strong men and weak men. Many of them are contributing as fair a measure of their energies to Amanullah's cause as men can give to a scheme that is not their own, and of which they possess only a meagre comprehension. Others subscribe to the work with fatalism. Kings come and go — some have one plan, some another. It is their fate to work

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on Amanullah's plan and so they do. Still another type believes that modernization of the nation is the silly idea of a crackpot. They work to carry it on, feeling that the faster it progresses, the quicker it will fail. And they lay their real efforts to fixing a spot on which to land when the structure tumbles.

All are skilled in the ruthless politics of the court, and each seeks to assure his own place in any new scheme rather than the furtherance of any ideal which is the way with men, unless, of course, they happen to be queer fanatics obsessed by a queer dream to the point that they forget themselves in the accomplishment of their goal. However, there is no Lincoln nor Lenin around the table. Nevertheless they are launched on a social experiment.

The talk sounds big. The accomplishments they review and the undertakings they project are worthy enough, yet the black spot is on Amanullah's forehead as surely as on Captain Flint's. Nevertheless, there are glamorous months ahead of the young king before fate overtakes him.

Amanullah is going abroad, to see with his own eyes the models he has chosen for his country to imitate.

But there is work to be done first; much is to be discussed before Amanullah goes off on his gaudy pilgrimage to alien shrines of concrete and steel.

Many reforms, no few industrial enterprises, and several large-scale utility developments are under way. Besides that, edicts have been posted ordering revolutionary changes in the personal affairs of the Afghan

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citizens. There are reports to be considered on the workings of these dangerously novel laws.

Amanullah has heeded some few points of his firm grandfather's practical advice. For the Amir Abdur Rahman, he who declared he was the iron ruler of an iron people, earnestly warned his sons and successors against 'democratic autocrats'. 'The people are not ready to rule,' he said, and inferred that the Afghans would continue to remain incapable of democratic institutions.

Amanullah has respected his forefather's old-fashioned words: 'I strongly urge my sons and their successors never to make themselves puppets in the hands of these representatives of constitutional government; they must always reserve for themselves the power of organizing the army; keep it in their own hands without admitting any right of interference by their constitutional advisers.'

Still another antiquated notion of Abdur Rahman fitted the king's programme: 'To secure the crown and throne of Kabul for my sons and successors from the foreign aggressors, from the various claimants to the throne and the rebels of Afghanistan, great attention must be paid to the system of the military.' But then no one could be King of Afghanistan without giving grave consideration to those three threats, and no crown could remain stable unsupported by the bayonets of the troops.

But otherwise Amanullah and his government had departed from the old king's instructions. They failed to listen to this admonition: 'My sons and successors

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should not try to introduce new reforms of any kind in such a hurry as to set the people against their ruler. They must adopt all these gradually, as the people become accustomed to the idea of modern innovations.'

The council meeting, which takes place one day when we are following Amanullah about his palace, reflects in miniature all the conflicts and victories Amanullah has gone through in his seven years' reign.

He has but a short spin to the peak of his career. Everything is in full swing, but over him and his work hang an invisible doom.

The meeting begins informally. The Minister of Education is wearing a heavy silk cravat and a soft-collared shirt, a blue cheviot suit, and dull-brown brogues. Amanullah comments on the smart apparel.

'My tailor comes up from Bombay,' the minister explains. 'I understand he works for American bankers and the chief magistrate there. Your Majesty should look over his patterns.'

Amanullah does not reply, but explains the fine technical points of Queen Suraya's new car. 'And its long body is azure,' he says.

Another minister speaks. 'My wife's gowns came from Paris to-day. A dozen new ones. You will see the one I like best at tea to-day.'

There are some masculine jokes about the cost of women's clothes.

It is all fun, this writing one's name in history and at the same time enjoying immediate samples of the destiny which is being sketched for future generations.

No one of them looks out the windows beyond the

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palace wall at a fleck of white moving slowly along a mountain trail. It is a mullah journeying from a capital of infidel sin on his way to a tribal village. A hundred thousand of these priests are at that moment crawling over the country.

The king may direct the daily life of the people, but in the grimy hands of the mullahs rest their immortal souls. In the holy men a fierce fury throbs as the statesmen talk. The council forget, too, the ancient petitioners squatting in the foyer wrapped in their capes and staring stoically at the decorated walls. They are the personification of intrenched habit; the disciples of that stubborn cult of 'things as they are'.

The Minister of the Interior reports. The hydro-electric plan of Jabalus-Siray is completed. Power lines have been run to Paghman. The new European mansions built along the wide boulevards of this city which Amanullah has ordered to be built will flash bright with electric light.

The new capitol at Daral Aman is nearing completion. It is a huge, rectangular building high on the hill. Its hundreds of rooms are all ready for the plasterers. It looks like the Winter Palace of the Czar, and a German engineering firm is supervising its construction. There Amanullah will have vast, gaudy quarters, befitting a really modern monarch.

Government office buildings, myriad windowed and limitless, like government office buildings the world over, bulk near by. These are to be decoys to draw the people from the squalid labyrinths of ancient clay that is Kabul, to settle a new and cleaner city.

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The minister's statement of building progress is encouraging. In one hundred and twenty days the palace will be completed. Amanullah needs no details, for he drives often to watch the construction and knows the palace is almost finished.

I saw it just two years after the day the minister submitted his statistics. Scaffold was still up in the rooms and corridors. The halls were finished except for mosaics which were to have been laid on a concrete base. The walls were of lath and stone. The plasterers had never begun work. The office quarters were shells without windows, and the mansions of Paghman were empty. It was a still-born city.

But the men discussing the current work are political craftsmen, not seers. Though it should scarcely take supernatural power to catch a few syllables of the writing on the wall, they go on, oblivious of the gathering storm. The sun still shines.

Amanullah reads to courtiers the royal edict that has been prepared. It will be posted in bazaars and caravanseraies and on the sides of city gates. The shorthand-like script is an unsheathed fuse leading to social dynamite. The Royal Order says that women can and should go unveiled. Building European houses might be heresy, but here is sacrilege.

Afghan men stand obdurate and present immobile barriers against the enlightenment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that has made its insidious way into the purdah system of other Mohammedan countries.

Afghan women are inviolate. No other man but the

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husband can look upon the face of a wife. The curses of Allah and the more tangible stones of the faithful are on the head of the woman so shameless that she will let the morning sun of the bazaar fall upon her face. Her purity and virtue have for ten centuries been protected in cloth wrappings. And chastity's handmaidens are filth, sickness, ignorance, and a thousand imps of frustration.

Not a minister who hears the edict can keep back a sudden gasp of horror. Blasphemy still shocks the newmade atheists. Reason is a futile weapon against dogmas and prejudices built up in childhood. Reason may dictate the conscious action, but it cannot block the emotional response. Nevertheless the cabinet signs the ukase.

Queen Suraya will lead the way. She will be publicly unveiled. That, too, is decided.

At last the stream of modernism is undammed, the flood is really touching the masses. The stimulus of this one daring act is the impetus for a more daring one. The mullahs' hold on the customs of the nation can be broken only by dramatic means.

The second royal edict has the temerity of a madman. The forcibly unveiled women are told to cut off their hair.

It seems ironic that millions of pounds, months of wars, the fate of a dynasty and the future destiny of a kingdom should have turned on styles of dress and coiffure. But it is these edicts which are to breed ruin and tragedy.

The cutting of women's hair in a Moslem nation is

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considered peculiarly horrible. It is the way of humans that they will often stand by with only indifferent grumblings when they are fooled and robbed and even enslaved by their leaders, and will then rise up in mighty wrath when a superficial custom is threatened.

Amanullah forgot much when he wrote his second decree. He forgot that Mohammedan men who anticipate in fantasy the sensuous heaven of the Prophet, where voluptuous women are to be had for the asking, always see visions of women with short hair. He forgot that the stagnant wives of the harem, when they fear their lord and master will stray, think always of bobbed-haired women. Clipped hair is the mark of prostitution.

The edict is issued.

Women of the court walk in the streets unveiled; the wind of ancient Asia blows back their cropped locks as they ride a bridle path. From the housetops, shrouded women watch them and wonder how it would feel to be so wicked. Their jealous, religious husbands sense the threat.

Another brazen decree is discussed. The holy beards of the men are now to be cut off. Vast, patriarchal, grey beards, which old tribesmen revere as a common link between themselves and Mohammed, sleek goatees and ferocious, bristly, orange beards dyed with sacred henna — all have to be shaved if their possessors are to walk in the new streets of Kabul. And furthermore, turbans cannot be worn — only European hats, if citizens are to use the main thoroughfares.

But Amanullah is still king, the saviour of his

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country's independence and the right hand of God. That, too, is a rooted concept in the Afghan mind. Only when the Agent of God encroaches on personal emotions and commits ungodly acts, first doubt and then rebellion is bred.

But the fatal decrees are ready and resolved upon. It remains only to post them up in Kabul.

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CHAPTER III

THE next chapter in Amanullah's history might have been taken from a comic-opera plot. There was good and evil in conflict, no half issues. There was a prince championing the unsullied cause of enlightenment, while pitted against him were evil, smiling sycophants, steeped in the villainy of ancient ways. The show was on, in all its oriental pageantry.

No operatic monarch departing for a crusade could have brought a first-act finale to a better climax than Amanullah achieved when his cavalcade of shiny, imported limousines swung through the bazaars of Kabul bound for an Indian seaport and a triumphant journey through infidel Europe to learn at first hand the stuff of which his dreams were made.

Nothing was lacking. Everyone on the streets who cheered him as he went through Kabul was as aware as any ensemble of townsmen, milkmaids, and ladies-in-waiting, their hands fluttering above their heads as the curtain dropped, that the devil was to be paid in the next two acts.

It was *opéra bouffe*, except for the fact that the booming of guns would not be heard off stage and that grease paint would not be used for blood.

So Amanullah left on his European tour, an egoist wearing a crown and self-consciously writing his name in history.

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I heard from men who saw him leave that:

Wali Khan, whom he left behind as acting king, gave a sigh of relief when the motors pushed through the gate, rested an hour to get his breath and then set to work to make his job permanent.

That the agents of Wali, dressed in the garb of mullahs, went out at once to tell the tribes about the unholy pilgrimage upon which the king had departed.

King Amanullah and Queen Suraya and their retinue progressed, wide-eyed at the splendour of the outside world and utterly content in their conceit, oblivious of the machinery of disaster set in motion at home.

Bombay, accustomed to receptions of maharajas rich as Crœsus, gave Amanullah its best.

Pomp at home had been mere titillation, now Amanullah's will to power was on the rampage. He was insatiable. He caused an incident. At a dinner, given on the eve of his departure from Bombay for Constantinople, he objected to the seating arrangement, maintaining that it inferred he was not a full-fledged king.

Amanullah, so far as British recognition was concerned, was always sensitive. He had won the right from them to be called His Majesty rather than His Highness, and he wanted everything that went with it. Besides, had not British India put on a big show for him? They were realizing his importance and he was taking advantage of it. Not only did he force a compromise in the dinner seating arrangements, but he also made a speech during which he urged the subjects

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of his hosts to up and throw them out. Before the lords and masters of India he harangued in favour of Indian independence.

There are two theories as to the real effect of this incident upon the British lords and masters of India. One is that they were perturbed by their influential Mohammedan guest's treasonable talk; the other that they were well pleased, quite satisfied that their schemes were working well.

One story I heard often repeated in Kabul was that Amanullah's programme for Westernizing his country had been frowned upon in Downing Street, and that a change in the monarchy was desired by the British. A subtle way was chosen to bring this about.

The Afghans, by temperament, religion, and custom, were not ready for a sudden change in their daily life. If Amanullah's plans for reform could be accelerated, then the violence of his countrymen's reactions would be proportionately increased. He would go too far and bring on rebellion.

A good way to fan the paranoiac flame already burning in the crusading king was to 'yes' him on his way — not alone by reasonable affirmations but by adding to them all the pageantry that a great empire can unfold, as welcoming chimes and bands echo 'Pomp and Circumstance'.

His boat made its way over the glassy waters of Bombay's harbour bound for the lands of the infidel. The Red Sea was flat and hot as a leaden lake in hell when the liner docked at Suez. No heat could oppress the royal party. All was well in the family circle, and

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the bacillus of power-lust was rapidly incubating in the staring sun.

The party made its way by motor over the sands to Cairo. They passed villages where veiled women peeped out at the speeding motors. Ahead was the capital of Mohammedan Egypt, bedecked for the reception of a favourite son of the Prophet.

The regal entourage drove through the streets. The cheering of the crowds roared always ahead of the king's car, but stilled abruptly as it passed. Pious Mohammedans waiting to see the ruler of the one pure Islamic nation were stunned. At the king's side was his queen in a fluttering French frock, her smiling face unveiled. Here was blasphemy and unabashed sin.

Amanullah had thrown discretion to the desert wind. He was an amused, polite bully forcing his own flagrant heresy down the throats of his own sect. The gushing flattery of officialdom permitted him to laugh at the shock he had given the faithful of Cairo. Telegraph wires buzzed the story across Persia and carried it over the single strand that is draped across Afghanistan to the palace in Kabul.

Here Wali Khan, the acting king, heard it and made the most of it. He sent his agents into the hills again with the story that the queen was abroad unveiled and that other Mohammedan nations were holding the Afghans in scorn, as betrayers of their religion.

At dinner in Cairo, Queen Suraya sat at a flower-banked table. News cameras came to snap the royal visitors. The picture they took showed the queen's bare shoulders emerging from ferns, white linen and

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silver. Amanullah was proud. Here was proof that the modern world was honouring him and his queen. The photographs were dispatched by courier to the acting king at Kabul. Wali could have wished no finer gift. He had many copies made, and turned them over to the mullahs. The mullahs mounted their donkeys and rode from one hill-village to another, leaving a picture with each brother-priest they met.

At sunset in tea houses the mullahs exhibited them. 'Our godless king,' they said, 'is taking his queen among the infidels naked.' And the bare neck and shoulders of Suraya at the dinner table proved it.

Naples, Mussolini and Victor Emanuel had a welcome ready. It must have gratified the flamboyant Afghan's hunger for pomp. There were battleships and aeroplanes, and the quay-side was a Latin festival. He was in that fine flush of high spirits that is often bred in a man of rank away from home, untroubled by the critical gaze of his own countrymen.

The blue bay, Vesuvius idly puffing smoke, salmon-tiled roofs atop pastel-tinted houses spread over the mountainside. The broad boulevard of black asphalt skirting the harbour, where ships flying many flags sailed in and out — Amanullah was more than merely visiting the Western world here. He was touching a modern land ruled with an iron hand. He was to meet Mussolini, whom he greatly admired and whose friend he was now to be, and he would get some pointers not only on things to do but on how to do them.

Banner-strung tenders and a convoy of cruisers

swarmed around the liner as it paused to take the welcoming committee aboard.

A grim harbinger preceded the Italian dignitaries on to the deck where Amanullah and Suraya stood.

Three men from Afghanistan.

Travellers abroad may be glad to meet fellow countrymen at the right moment, but if one is caught up by the glamour of foreign adulation, the illusion can easily be marred by friends from home, who, by their very presence inject reality into a pleasant dream.

The three men from Afghanistan who came toward Amanullah were not merely unwelcome, they were a menace.

They were the banished brothers come from their retirement at Nice to greet their cousin and their king. Nadir Khan, pale, with two hectic spots of red beneath his eyes, half-buried in his black beard; Hashim Khan, tall, muscular, with broad tapering shoulders, big enough to tear to pieces the little king who he believed had tried to bring about his assassination, and smiling but not concealing the hatred in his eyes.

With the royal couple stood Amanullah's sister and her husband.

Hashim Khan saw his one-time fiancée and with her the two men to whose unholy love she had been a sacrifice.

Nadir Khan, no longer marshal of his Majesty's victorious armies, not even a humiliated ambassador, had come to pay homage, as a royal vassal to a foolish lord.

Neither of the brothers considered the king's pro-

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gramme anything but insane. Politically they opposed him. Family quarrels separated them further; and, certainly, even if they did not aspire to kingship, they wanted to have a hand in the making of a new ruler.

Nadir Khan first, as the oldest of the brothers, they bent low, kissed the king's hand and stood aside for the Italian delegates to pay their respects. Their next action was the beginning of a first-class family brawl, as well as the beginning of disaster.

Hashim Khan greeted Suraya but did not kneel to kiss her hand. Both of the brothers ignored Amanullah's sister and her husband. When the boat docked, Nadir Khan approached his Majesty in the required fashion, 'We beg your Majesty's permission to depart'.

Amanullah granted it with a smiling nod. The brothers left the ship.

Amanullah inquired for them at the train; and at the reception in Rome he asked again for his compatriots, but they were absent. He flew into a rage. No permission had been given them, he said, to leave his retinue. It was *lèse-majesté*.

The brothers insisted that they had misunderstood. They maintained that they regarded the king's permission to depart as final, and so they returned at once to their villa on the French Riviera.

Amanullah pouted, then telephoned Nadir Khan, who invited him to the villa. Amanullah broke his scheduled appointments to accept the invitation. The brothers were, even at a distance, politically powerful at home, and Amanullah was in a buoyant mood. His call was a peace offering.

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Amanullah sat with the brothers in the drawing-room of their villa; a reconciliation was under way. Nadir Khan, if only for patriotic reasons, was doing his best to smooth over the family trouble. Hashim Khan, reluctant at first to make concessions or forgive, was following his brother's lead.

The conference was interrupted by the appearance of Queen Suraya with Amanullah's sister and her husband. Hashim Khan declared that to bring the latter into his home was an insult; said he had had enough of Amanullah's direct and indirect humiliations. The party broke up in a row.

On the train to Paris Amanullah wired Nadir Khan to meet him in the French capital.

Nadir Khan was willing to go, but Hashim said, 'No, you must not be a fool. Amanullah is only planning some fresh way to humble you. He may even have you killed.'

Nadir Khan took his brother's counsel. Once again later on in far Peshawar, Hashim Khan was to restrain his brother from a reconciliation with Amanullah and, by so doing, put him on the throne.

Amanullah was continuing his progress. In the glamour of the journey the incident vanished, as had his perception of conditions in his native land. Not since the days when kings and czars went gallivanting to neighbouring potentates on peace missions before declaring war, has London given such a welcome to a visiting monarch.

The reception in England was royal. Dinners and races, garden parties, inspections of factories and mines

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were all in the programme. For whatever effect it might have upon a cocky and untrustworthy king, thousands of British troops paraded for him, the navy steamed by and a tremendous air pageant was put on. But Amanullah was in no mood to see any moral in the demonstration. He only saw it as a desirable model for his nation to ape.

Each realm he visited suggested new devices of modernization to apply in his native land. His head was packed with embryo plans awaiting only his return to Kabul to put them into execution.

The more countries he visited, the higher rose his enthusiasm. He was a little man, with not one big idea but thousands of them. He was like the little man, only without his modesty, who said, 'It's marvellous, it's colossal the ideas I have; thousands of them run through my head every day, but I just can't write 'em down or do anything about 'em. That's the only trouble.'

Amanullah saw the new Turkey. His ship, convoyed by an arrowhead of grey destroyers, passed through the Bosphorus. He visited Russia and drove overland to Teheran.

Here he met the first obstacle that should have reminded him of barriers he still had to surmount. In the west he had met with nothing but stimulus for his dreams. Now once more he was in Asia.

He was received at Palavi with oriental pomp. Queen Suraya disembarked with him, dressed in one of her new frocks. Persia, though years ahead of Afghanistan in modernization, looked ancient and dilapidated. The synthetically sophisticated Afghan

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monarch was eager to show a neighbouring Moslem nation exactly how emancipated a king of Islam could be. But his intentions were not to be carried out.

Shah Riza Khan Palavi, King of Kings, sent his emissaries to the border with limousines and good wishes and also a polite but firm request that Suraya put on her clothes and act like a Moslem lady. The warrior shah, no prude so far as anyone's conduct was concerned, nor a ruler who catered to the whim of the mullahs, nevertheless thought the young king was going too fast a pace.

Though Amanullah complied with the request and veiled his wife, he had one last fling before crossing the border. He motored up and down the rocky Lalazar on a last shopping orgy, patronizing European and Persian shops alike, and refusing change for a five-pound note, no matter how trivial the price of his purchase.

Neither five pounds, nor a hundred-thousand pounds for that matter, seemed more than a drop in the bucket to Amanullah fresh from rich countries. He had been fraternizing with chancellors of exchequer who talked in billions — billions that could be produced by modernized nations not so rich in natural resources as his own.

His journey had cost many thousands of pounds, and his improvements under way at home many more, and he had committed himself for still more thousands with contracts he had made in Europe. A few five-pound notes, though they be the last in his purse, mean nothing to the gambler who thinks he is betting on a

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certainty. The king regarded his expenditures as but trivial notes drawn on funds which his imagination sketched as already in existence. It only remained to get back to Kabul and wish upon his people the riches which centuries had piled up for European lands.

His motors flashed through the azure arch of Teheran's Meshed gate. The flags on the porticos of the foreign legations were his last glimpse of the occidental world.

Damghan, Astrabad, Meshed — they all gave him welcome. But to Amanullah they were puny, decrepit cities, old like the hills around them. Suraya was veiled. Sickly Asiatics stared at him while he trundled through ancient streets, the mayors who greeted him were slouchy fellows, and there was only tea to drink. It was not like London nor Rome nor Paris, and it never would be. Was not the shah so old-fashioned that he wanted the queen veiled? And did not reactionary Persians lift their eyebrows at his extravagance? They did not know what great things could be done. They still heeded ancient customs and calculated present costs.

Eastward his caravan sped from Meshed. Still wrapped in the alien haze of Western life, he believed in spite of everything that his countrymen behind the mountains into which he was climbing were somehow inculcated with his own enthusiasm. He had called upon them to finance his journey and his contracts by levying taxes three years in advance. Before he had left, he had promised the army a raise in pay. They had not had it. They had received no pay at all.

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He knew that his officials habitually extorted money; that army officers took a cut from each private's pay; that bandits were given concessions to operate on assigned trails; that cabinet ministers took bribes right and left. However, he had commanded them, before he left, to cease all this. These orders and intentions he regarded as facts accomplished, and so his home-coming should be smooth.

Herat was his first Afghan city. It had always been a strong province of his. Mahmood Tarzi, his Foreign Minister and Queen Suraya's father, hailed from Herat. Mahmood was, if possible, a more ardent disciple of modernization than Amanullah. He had converted his daughter to the new ways and constantly used her influence to keep the king's fervour for reform at white heat. And Herat was Mahmood's bailiwick.

And so on his return the first impression Amanullah got of his country was favourable. The governor in European clothes, his palace equipped with every Western appointment he could afford, was the scene of enthusiastic conferences. The governor was jolly and sure of his constituency. Suraya was very gay when the governor paid her great attention. He had given a fancy new motor car to one of Suraya's favourites. For this gesture Suraya prevailed upon her husband to appoint the generous fellow to the governorship.

Bound for Kabul, the retinue went off in high spirits, the governor waving farewell to his king. That was the last they were to see of each other. A few weeks later, Amanullah, with his throne crumbling, was to

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hear that the Heratis had turned against him and that the governor had bought a smart car for a pretty girl for the last time. He was found murdered in the filthy streets of his capital.

It was to tragedy that Amanullah was speeding in his newest Rolls-Royce.

Amanullah's homecoming was celebrated with all the outward show to which he had become accustomed. Gloomy Kabul must have looked dingy, poverty-bitten and ancient. But Wali Khan and his ministers had prepared a welcome. Edicts drawn up before the king departed were now released. Some of these laws made it a felony to appear on the main thoroughfare of the town in anything but European clothing. Barbers were set up at the gates to clip the holy beards of tribesmen before they were permitted to enter the city. Ready to pass in review was a contingent of Afghan girls, unveiled and bound for European schools. Bazaar keepers could no longer squat in the midst of their merchandise, chairs and tables were ordered in all shops.

Tribesmen in loose, baggy pants and embroidered vests and turbans trekked to the city carrying absurd bundles. The bundles contained nondescript Western suits and soft felt hats. Before they emerged on to the main street of the town, they paused to stuff themselves dressed as they were, into the pants, vests, and coats they carried. Some fastened a felt hat to the turban, others pushed the turbans into the pockets of the already bulging apparel. Timid men walked sheepishly, like children dressed up for a party by doting

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mothers. Others strode belligerently, resenting their humiliation and muttering curses. This was poor reward for taxes paid in advance.

A gala celebration was arranged at which the royal family were to demonstrate new models of dress and decorum. The feature of this was the public unveiling of Queen Suraya. Afghans stood by while the swathes of cloth that covered the queen from head to foot were raised. She stood before them, a pretty, dark-eyed woman in a Parisian dress that boldly suggested the lines of her trim figure.

The natives were stunned. To them she appeared absurd and unnatural. French dressmaking which accentuates feminine charm according to Western standards was lost on them. No costume of that sort could fail to shock an Afghan.

It was a motley, disturbed scene. The Easterners, in their Western habiliments, might have been comic buffoons watching the queen go through a grotesque charade. Even though crazy, it was an earnest attempt to change the minds of the people by changing their wardrobe.

The crash came a few weeks later. It started with an incident not at all unusual — a tribal revolt. Putting down these uprisings had always been the Augean occupation of Afghan monarchs holding together the loosely-knit nation of warlike clans.

This revolt had its origin in Amanullah's doings, though objections to reformed dress were not at the root of the disturbance. They played a part in spreading the discontent, but it was the high taxes and

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the corrupt officials grabbing their share which put a match to the tinder.

It started in the Shinwari territory. The Shinwaris perennially enjoy a fight, although in this instance they insisted they were not aggressive. A tribe of Koochis were making their way through the Shinwari country, their caravans laden with rich goods. They were heavily armed, alert, guarding their merchandise. These Koochis came upon a band of Shinwaris, also armed, and, suspecting them to be bandits, fired on them without ado, killing and wounding many. Before the caravan had gone out of the territory, the Shinwaris were down on it in full force and captured the whole tribe. They herded the Koochis to the capital and turned them over to the police.

Shinwari chieftains were assured by the king's officials that justice would be meted out to the Koochis for their unprovoked attack. Yet the next morning the prisoners were freed, and the personal coffers of local officialdom were ten thousand rupees richer.

Shinwari chieftains were outraged. They could get no justice from the bribe-taking hirelings of their king, and set out to see what they could do about it themselves. One obvious remedy for their trouble was a new king.

They started an uprising against Amanullah. This, as I have said, was no new tribal procedure. A certain amount of straining at the leash of centralized government had always been a time-honoured exercise in Afghanistan. This time, however, the Shinwaris had all the equipment for war; they possessed guns, and in

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fact the majority of all the tribes were armed. They also had the elements of excellent propaganda against the monarch.

All Amanullah's reforms were anathema to the hill people. The Shinwaris, elaborating upon the king's heresies, easily recruited help. To chieftains whose aid they sought they needed but to mention the excessive taxation; while to the rank and file of warriors the lascivious goings-on in the capital were inflammatory propaganda.

Had not the king taken his wife through Europe naked? And did he not sit in the palace looking at magic pictures? And were not the beards of the holy men not only pulled but cut?

With an army thus recruited, the Shinwaris made their way to Jalalabad, the eastern capital, and stormed and took it.

This crisis showed up the weakness resulting from the king's attempts at modernization.

The army had been reduced so that money might be diverted to new projects. Its morale was low. The unpaid, tattered troops of the King had in his absence proved fertile soil for the seeds of discontent the mullahs had planted. Plots against the king within his own court had been worked out in detail during his absence.

Amanullah resorted to well-established precedent in dealing with uprisings. He sent his army into action, and then distributed arms to tribes not involved in the revolt and made them recruits to his forces. This time the old scheme of setting tribe against tribe,

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usually so successful, failed. After accepting the king's arms and professing friendliness, these tribes also joined the revolutionists.

This revolt, by drawing Amanullah's troops away from the capital, proved the turning point in his reign.

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CHAPTER IV

AMANULLAH and Wali Khan sat alone in a long room that looked out upon the palace lawn. Tiny leaves on the thick, close-cropped hedges that edged the garden were withered. A few tenacious leaves hung on the barren branches of a row of trees. New hoods of snow upon the jagged mountain-tops sparkled in the December sunlight.

Through the crisp air came distant, staccato cracks like the sound of a child's stick run along the pickets of a fence — machine guns. Then desultory rifle fire and the occasional thick detonation of cannon. Grey, cold clouds were pouring like a torrent over the clear sky.

Amanullah was disturbed. His war-like subjects had chosen a poor time to go on a rampage, just when he, bursting with plans for their welfare, was impatient to put them into effect.

It was not enough that the Shinwari revolt had required the presence of the full Kabul garrison at Jalalabad. Bacho Saquo, a bandit with a thousand men, was up in the hills sniping at the city. Only eighty regulars were left to defend the capital, besides the hundred or so youngsters in their teens attending the cadet school.

The military position did not greatly perturb the king. It would, he believed, turn out all right. Still, it was an irritating stumbling block in the royal progress to modernization.

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Kabul, waiting sullenly for sunset, was not so secure. City people caught in the traps of their intricate, little lives depended upon their military guardians to care for them. They doubted whether the king to whose game of Westernization they had docilely submitted would have any occidental magic to save them from the threatening robber band or keep order in the town.

Municipal police were organized to resist the attack. For a week there had been murder and robbery in the streets at night. Now the lighting plant — an infidel contrivance that had been first accepted, then appreciated, and finally relied upon — had been shelled. The city was dark. Rain, followed by hail turning into a sharp sleet, came at sunset. The firing increased. Amanullah and Wali talked on.

Oil lamps were brought in, mocking the dead electric candelabra, as if to say, 'The flame of grease is old and pure: it has lighted at nightfall the faces of more men and women than incandescent bulbs in all their pallid intensity'.

'They should be through the gates by dusk,' Wali Khan encouraged the king.

Amanullah stared at the incessant wiggling of his patent-leather slipper and tapped his crossed knee.

'Your Majesty should be careful in considering any offer the bandit makes. Your throne is strong. The petty raid of this outlaw, who comes to harass us while the troops are away, is but the yelping of a cur,' declared Wali Khan.

The light of an automobile cut through the rain at

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the palace gate and fell upon the windows as it turned under the portico. 'They are here,' said his Majesty.

A servant announced the newly arrived officers who brought with them an overture of peace from Bacha Saquo and his gang. Wali spoke softly to Amanullah as the men entered and salaamed.

An officer laid a huge book on the table. It was the Koran. To the holy word of Mohammed had been added two pages of fresh script, which thus took on the sanctity of the volume, setting out the terms offered by Bacha Saquo and tribal chieftains from the area north of Kabul. If Amanullah affixed his signature it would become an agreement, with a hundred thousand holy words to attest its inviolability.

'Ahmed Ali waits in the bandit camp for your Majesty's signature and the return of this Koran,' said the officer.

Wali Khan caught Amanullah's eye and his Majesty dismissed the emissaries. Together the two men read the terms.

Ahmed Ali had ventured into the incensed countryside and to the brigand's haunts to negotiate this peace. He was a warrior, shrewd and grey, who had been Amanullah's Minister to Berlin. He had managed to call a *grigah* at which three thousand tribesmen assembled. He talked to them and, after the meeting, sat on the floor of barren rooms with patriarchal chieftains, making the overtures and concessions necessary to gain their support. They agreed to furnish six thousand men to keep peace in the hills and to send

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seven hundred to police Kabul, while Bacha Saquo also covenanted to cease raids on the capital. The consideration for this bargain was that Amanullah promise immunity to the dacoit and his cohorts. The terms of this offer had been copied in the hallowed book while seven hundred hillmen looked on to see the signatures affixed.

Amanullah stared at the volume in silence. He could clear the way and be free to go on with his reforms by signing his name. It was humble pie for an Alexandrian monarch, but the bargain of expediency can be made only in its own values. And here was a bargain. These hill fellows as an incident of their concession would expect a modification of the hated customs Amanullah was enforcing. If the king could immediately disarm them, he could wheedle them into line after danger was gone.

The regular boom of guns, thumping like huge desert drums, came through the sleet that whipped the window panes. Beyond the castle wall red and yellow flames leaped into the night. Riots were by now a matter of course; but an officer reported an especially violent uprising.

Amanullah and Wali hurried to the upper floor of the building. Over the wall, in the wide street, was a mad scene. Flaming pyres of European clothes lit up other heaps of garments ready to be ignited. Turbaned men were pouring petrol on to the despised apparel, howling oaths and damning their king with religious fury, fear-incited. If their backsliding ruler was so weak he could not protect them, and their city was to

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be sacked, they would at least die in the garb of Islam, faithful.

'Fanatics and damnable priests,' muttered Wali.

Amanullah nodded and said: 'Now is the moment to give another lesson to these mullahs'.

In the prison of the palace were cells full of holy men ranting and praying as Amanullah watched the bonfires: priests from the hills charged with inciting the Shinwaris to rebellion. For months their talk to the people had been one part religion and ten parts spicy gossip about their king. The pious priests wanted no schools — they were the schools. They wanted no women out of purdah, to challenge bonds of orthodox adherence. To shatter those was to endanger their livelihood. Their king menaced a profitable faith.

'Your Majesty,' urged Wali, 'should indeed execute them in the morning.'

'It will be done,' said Amanullah.

The two men approached the Koran. Wali touched it lightly with the tips of his fingers and smirked. He shook his head.

'Your Majesty,' he repeated, 'will, I trust, never sign an agreement with a bandit. It is an unnecessary humiliation. Your Majesty is above it.'

Amanullah listening to the plaudits of a London crowd as he rode to Buckingham Palace, was riding no more buoyant a wave than Wali Khan now rode. His plans were working. The threads were all in his hands. If nothing slipped, seventy-two hours of rebellion would see them knotted securely — complete.

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If Amanullah would but execute the mullahs, that would be the last straw, and would surely shatter the last strands of Kabul's unwillingness to turn against the king.

The exhilaration of an artist as he daubs the final touches on his canvas was Wali's when he advocated the execution of the priests.

A few weeks before, Wali had plotted with these same mullahs he now condemned as he told them stories of the king's European escapades. To them also he had given photographs depicting Queen Suraya's immodesties. He had even handed them a few sacks of coin that they might buy tea to be drunk while tribesmen heard their tales. He had promised them high places in the council should they succeed in their mission. That had been one trick in the courtier's game; now their death would be another.

But all Wali's plans would be for nought if Amanullah signed the Koran. Arms which the bandit Bacha was using at that moment and which he, Wali, had gone to the trouble of securing for the marauder would be useless.

'Your Majesty will not sign the Koran to-night?' queried Wali, his inflection flavoured with command.

'Not to-night,' replied Amanullah. 'Perhaps Ahmed Ali can get help by morning without this rigmarole. We will send the priests to the parade ground to-morrow at noon. It will teach their kind that I am still king.'

Amanullah was up at dawn next day, when the firing was resumed. Wali had arisen ahead of him and

dispatched a spy to the hills with word for Bacha Saquo. Wali wanted to guard against any contingency. His message to the bandit ran:

'If Amanullah signs the Koran, disregard his signature, for he will be lying. He has not yet signed, but if he does, it will be one of his tricks. You know Allah is as dirt to him.'

A drizzle, sometimes shot with sleet and again with flat wet flakes of snow, continued throughout the day. A little before noon a dozen mullahs, the chains that bound them together clanking, were led from the palace prison down the wide, new avenue lined with furious, frightened townsmen. At the parade ground they were strapped across the mouths of old-fashioned cannon. No new-fangled shells, but round, iron cannon balls blew them in two. (I was told by witnesses of this execution that the trunks of the priests' bodies catapulted into the air to almost supernatural heights, while their legs dropped straight and rigid.)

The fusillade of bandit fire was by mid-afternoon pouring into the city from more and more hilltops. The seventy men of the palace guard, manning the king's guns, were returning fire accurately, but the citizens of Kabul had lost faith in the young monarch. Rifles were distributed to the townsmen, who took up places guarding the walls. Barbed-wire entanglements were set up in the streets and at the gates. The bulk of the populace cared little whether they wore turban or hat; they stayed indoors. Bazaars were closed. The countryside was in chaos. Jalalabad was a shambles. The road from Khyber was closed. There

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were riots in Kandahar. A courier brought news that the governor of Herat had been murdered and that the northern city had turned against its ruler.

Amanullah summoned his councillors. Tribal wars were no new subject for an Afghan monarch's cabinet to tackle, but this one was different. Old tactics would not work. Tribe could not be played against tribe this time. Though there was no obvious collusion between Bacha Saquo and the Shinwaris, and none between these two and the Heratis, they nevertheless had a common grievance — heavy taxes and the attack on old habits.

Also Amanullah had not expected hostility in Herat. It hurt.

The council discussed possible ways out. His Majesty could have signed the Koran agreement, but in any case it was too late. Bacho Saquo had already chided the monarch's emissary, Ahmed Ali, for his attempt to make peace and was set upon taking Kabul.

For eight years Amanullah had been sure that he would see his nation suddenly transformed into a modern power; that he would enjoy benefits to flow from the change; that he would grow old in Paghman with asphalt boulevards, bungalows, electric lights, tramcars and all the things around him that make an estate-agents' paradise. More than that, he had anticipated that when he died his name would be written in history as a conqueror of human nature and of age-old habits. Not only posterity's verdict, but his very hope of life on the morrow was now being

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threatened by the bandit's guns moving closer, striking with surer aim.

Amanullah and his older brother, Inayatullah, sat in the king's study. The secretary sat silent and unnoticed at the side of the desk across which the brothers talked. First one dictated, then the other. Their dictation was read back to them. They decided it wouldn't do, and started again. The guns were booming. Sentence by sentence they worked on their writing. The secretary took it down in sharp script that looked like bird tracks. Once more oil lamps triumphed over the dark electric candelabra.

The brothers, in their concentration, forgot the night their father had been murdered and both had tried for the throne: forgotten, too, were the soft nights veiling Western pleasures. Even the dark city was erased as they finished their writing.

Kabul was tense, waiting for the next attack. Daylight was still an hour away. Copies were made of the dictated material.

The palace swarmed with courtiers and statesmen. Their European clothes looked odd in that setting which might have been a castle hall of Peter the Great's, and still more odd in the heart of a city inhabited by turbaned men and veiled women, surrounded by walls that Jenghiz Khan had stormed.

The courtiers were concerned only with the events which were about to transpire, which might well hold possible death for them by noon. In spite of this, their attention went immediately to a carved door that swung open.

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King Amanullah passed through it, bundled in a fur coat. His Queen was on his arm. Suraya, with a woman's capacity to ignore reality and to hope, was grave but radiant in her sables. Her share in the king's dreams had been little personal triumphs, which she still relished. But Amanullah saw not only his dreams, but his empire, his heritage and his future vanish as he passed down the red-velvet carpet on the wide, marble stairway.

A motor car — a Rolls-Royce that had been his first symbol of modernization — waited in the driveway under a portico. Amanullah and Suraya entered it; a servant wrapped a robe about their legs. There was no light on the dashboard. A gaunt Afghan chauffeur sat in the darkness, a part of the machine. The door clicked shut, and the automobile twisted down the drive, passed the sentries unchallenged and through the gates on to the sleeping streets. At a few intersections barbed-wire entanglements had to be removed.

The motor sped up the new, tree-lined boulevard of crushed gravel that was wet and leaden in the icy rain, climbed a steep hill into the mountains, crawling up sharp grades and gliding over trails chiselled in precipitous cliffs, and finally began a downward trek.

As the gears that had hauled it up hill were shifted and the brakes applied to stem the heavy motor in its coast down to the south-east, in that moment death came to a dynasty.

Amanullah was fleeing from the ancient kingdom of his fathers. Farther and farther down the hills he

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went. The sullen rumble of guns was lost and the air was still, as the drenched, grey dawn came over the land that had once been his. On he sped, away from the cries of his wounded soldiers and his plundered capital. He could no longer smell the incendiary smoke that was consuming the last fragment of his dreams. He was bound for that pitiful purgatory on earth, where men who once have been great but are now afraid to die talk to each other of yesterday.

The sun came through the clouds, the day was cold and clear as he sped southward. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. At that moment Inayatullah would be reading aloud the document they had both worked on the night before. It was his own abdication. He had renounced the throne in favour of his brother. The harassed citizens of Kabul were dully listening to the pronouncement.

Bacha Saquo was moving on to Kabul with his robber band.

'I cannot understand,' Amanullah said to Suraya. 'I cannot understand.'

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CHAPTER V

ALTHOUGH Amanullah did not understand, Bacha Saquo understood perfectly.

As he confessed afterwards, he laughed in his beard when he heard that Amanullah had run away in a 'fire machine'.

None of the tribes took the turnover from Amanullah to Inayatullah very seriously. Inayatullah, they believed, was also corrupted by Westernization. To accept him would be jumping from the frying-pan into the fire. The new government could recruit no soldiers among them; but Bacha's forces were increasing daily.

Inayatullah spent a hectic week on the throne. Then he too dropped the crown, hopped into an aeroplane, and flew over the mountains to India, more concerned with the stability of its motor than with the kingdom that disappeared beneath him.

Bacha knew even before he heard the plane go that Inayatullah was finished, for Wali Khan was still Vakil of Kabul and fleet-footed messengers passed busily between him and the bandit.

'They are hares,' said Bacha to one of his tattered lieutenants. 'All kings that flee and all men who live in towns have hearts of glass. But I will live in their towns and I will have wires to carry my voice, and you can talk to me by calling — *Alla Huzrat* at Kabul. That is the king's own number at the palace.'

Then Bacha Saquo laughed.

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Not two weeks earlier he had called that number from Jalalabad. No practical joker getting a man out of bed at night ever enjoyed a better laugh than Bacha Saquo did then. He had surrounded the governor of the highland city with two thousand men and sneaked into the executive residence, where he surprised the official sipping green tea at his desk.

He gleefully described the incident to a correspondent:

' "Give me Alla Huzrat at Kabul," I said. Then a voice from the other end of the telephone answered. I had heard it roar a thousand times in the palace grounds when I was a soldier of the King.

'I said into the mouthpiece, "This is the governor of the province. I am reporting that I have captured Bacha Saquo and his gang. What shall I do with him?"

' "Shoot him like the dog that he is," came the reply over the wire.

'I hung up the receiver.

' "Ha, ha," I chuckled. "Now I know how well I am loved at court." '

Bacha Saquo knew even then that he was bound for the throne. 'May our shadows never grow less,' he grinned, and with his lieutenants leaped on their tawny horses and cantered down the mountain road towards Kabul. His star, burning brightly, was climbing to its zenith.

Impudence tinged his heavy lips. His set jaw said, 'I've done it'. Weariness of human frailty wrote perennial doubt in his black eyes. It was as though he said to himself: 'I've done it — yes. But what now?'

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BACHA SAQUO

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His soldiers had taken Kabul. The ancient city, like an old man who has seen the fires of passion ignite and burn, ignite and burn again, looked with blank, baked eyes on another conqueror. It prepared itself for another night's orgy with the bored acceptance of an old roué.

Squads of Bacha Saquo's troops were shooting down remnants of the Kabul garrison as he rode through the gate.

'Howl, Son of Man, howl. Glory for all and heaven for those who bleed!' he cried.

Kabul was his.

The brigand leaped from his horse and strode into the palace, clad in a dirty turban, baggy trousers, and old military blouse, his stockingless feet strapped in rough hide sandals. He entered it as Bacha Saquo — a bandit with a price on his head. Within another twenty-four hours he would be His Majesty, Habibullah Ghazi, the Beloved of God and The Defender of the Faith.

A field day for him and his aides ensued. For months they had been living daringly and frugally, like hunted mountain goats in precarious hill retreats. They had been attacking, retreating, storming cities, sacking villages. Now it was over.

Their tired horses were their first care. The day was cold and wet. Amanullah's garages for motor cars sufficed for stables but were without equipment. Priceless rugs were removed from the palace to be utilized as horse blankets.

Then they made themselves at home in the abode of

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Durani kings. They hung their cartridge belts on the candelabra, tore the cloth off the billiard tables and wound it into turbans, stacked their rifles on grand pianos, and scrubbed their boots in the wash-basins.

Bacha paused in settling himself in the palace only long enough to issue specific orders for the execution of his active enemies and the incarceration of all those connected with them.

Among these victims the members of Nadir Khan's family, sixty of them, men, women, children and small babies, were all thrown into dungeons, to eke out an existence on whatever coarse fare the bandit saw fit to give them.

Bacha Saquo was sitting on the bathroom floor in the palace at Kabul. After the first display of contemptuous vandalism he was already used to the surroundings he had envied. There only remained the practical problem of adjusting them to his habits. There was not much about the castle to give a homely feeling to a hill-bandit seeking rest. But there was water in the sunken marble baths; and the marble floor had a good, earthy hardness to it, so that he could spread a rug there, sit down and not be annoyed by cushions and chairs. The water was handy as a *jupe* for prayer ablutions; he could dip his brown hands in it, scoop some up and guzzle it. So he made the bathroom his audience chamber.

Beyond the window dull orange flames glowed from the city he had sacked. He smelled smoke, but no sentimental regrets for his plundering bothered him. Plunder was the way of the world. Smoke and fire

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followed it exactly as exhilaration came from the water he splashed on his elbows and let run to his finger tips.

Bacha Saquo had made his biggest raid. This time the prize was a kingdom. He had fought his way in. It had not been much different from attacking a heavily armed caravan. Royalty had scampered before him just as scared merchants had fled from their cargoes and hid behind rocks.

Certainly it had taken the help of wise men who could read and write, and possibly the aid of powerful foreign nations: but they all wanted something out of it, just as respectable merchants had willingly bought his stolen goods. The only difference was that the bandit in the bathroom was not inclined to sell his latest loot. He would keep it. If it was so valuable to others, it would also be valuable to him.

Wali Khan waited for him in one of the comfortable rooms. While Amanullah had been strolling in the paddock on Epsom Downs with the King of England, Wali Khan, then acting king of Afghanistan, had talked to Bacha Saquo and suggested that he storm Kabul. Wali Khan had promised help and had hinted that he might be able to procure the bandit some arms from an undeclared source. Bacha, the water carrier's son, had been approached before by merchants in the market for bargains in stolen goods, and was not at all shocked that a man of high estate should have dealings with a thief.

Now Wali Khan was waiting for his share of the loot.

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The bandit took a final pull of smoke from his chillum, blew it out through his beard and decided to be generous. He was a realist. He sent for Wali.

'We can share this together,' Wali began. 'You're not a man of learning. You don't know politics and you can't talk to foreigners. I, with your consent, can declare myself President, we can call the country a Republic. I promise to make you my Minister of War and you know that the real power will be yours.'

Bacha Saquo listened. He felt uncomfortable in the palace. To these men who could read and write he had imputed finer codes of honour than his own. His own code permitted an even distribution of tangible spoils on the spot. But this notion of promises did not appeal to him.

'No,' said Bacha Sqauo, 'I'll not make you President.'

'But I promise you full power,' the statesman insisted.

'No,' repeated Bacha.

'You can take my word that I will do as I say.'

'Could Amanullah?'

'Yes,' defiantly.

'Yes, Amanullah could trust you. He did. He raised you from nothing to the highest place in the land. Your king trusted you with his kingdom. You dealt with me while he was absent. If you would do that to a royal monarch what would you do to a bandit king?'

Bacha waved aside the politician and sat alone in his strange surroundings. The ways of learned and cul-

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tured men were also strange to Bacha, for Bacha was a hillman.

In fertile valleys decadence comes. Virility lives in the hills; hillmen have always come stalking into the valley trampling on soft-souled cultures as though they were not there, taking from the land the things they wanted, destroying the rest without conscience, almost unaware of their existence.

Only a year before Bacha had sat in a rocky fastness on a mountainside overlooking a caravan route that winds from Kabul to Samarkand.

His strong back against a boulder, his brown legs stretched before him on the hard, dry earth, he peered intently at the coloured points of his shoes. A frown, two deep furrows, drew his thick, coal-black eyebrows together over his strong nose with its wide flat nostrils. His black velvety beard looked as though it might have been painted around his heavy loose lips. A dirty turban, loosely wound, crowned his high slanting forehead. The black eyes had been steeled by daily gazing into the face of violent death. The cool fire in them had forced fate to drop its eyes first when Bacha saw fit to stare fate down.

Bacha's thoughts were stalking through memories as rugged as the hills around him. He had to fashion his ideas with the limited words of the hillman's dialect. Riches and power are terms in the most elementary vocabularies. It was on them that Bacha meditated as he waited.

There would be a caravan along before sundown. The routine of brigandage was monotonous. Practice

had made him sure that the raid he was waiting in ambush to make would be simple.

There was time on his hands to plan more ambitious forays. Without lifting his eyes, he spoke to a member of his band, who, a few paces from him, squatted before a charcoal stove, turning a spit of mutton. In the sunlight the glowing coals were dim.

'Fetch the holy man to me,' muttered Bacha Saquo. The low tone did not rob the words of their crispness.

A roar of command from the aide thundered over the camp; a mullah rose from his rug and climbed the hillside to the rock where the chieftain sat. The mullah's beard was a vast oblong of orange flame on his filthy tunic. No hair protruded from beneath his turban, for his head was shaved. His eyes blazed with the fanaticism of the Mohammedan priest, who sees always ahead of him a bloody trail that leads to heaven.

'Salaam,' said the mullah, his hand over his heart and his busy beard quivering, as beneath it an obsequious smirk formed.

'Tell me,' said Bacha, 'what does the fool Amanullah in Kabul do now?'

'He is growing rich as a Quarum.' (Quarum is Charen, who grew rich lifting the tongues of the dead and taking the gold coins from beneath them.) Bribery is rife. Taxes are unfair. He pays nothing to his soldiers and gives nothing to God. He robs and spends his loot in buying unholy things at infidel bazaars.'

Bacha Saquo was impatient with this trite, long-known story. The water in his chillum bubbled as he

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pulled through it the sweet smoke of charas that left a fierce stimulant in his blood. 'What did he do with Mullah Ali, your friend?'

The mullah glanced toward the waterpipe, where faint threads of smoke drifted from the beaded stem. The bandit ignored the silent request. 'Go on,' he said.

'This dawn I met Mohammed Wali at the tea-house in the pass. He told me how our holy brother Ali was called before the fool king. As our holy brother came into the room, there was laughter from the men with hearts of glass who sat around the king.

'One of the fools spoke. "You should have a European barber."

'They laughed, as they pointed to his sacred, hairless pate and patted their own infidel hair. Our brother mullah broke into tears to see the Prophet so disregarded.

'As he started to leave the room without the king's permission, the upstart roared, "Who is this God of yours that tells you to insult your king? Bring him to me, I say."

'The old man fled from the room. The courtiers laughed. Amanullah shouted an order. Two soldiers led our brother down the stairway. At noon yesterday the cannon boomed for him. And to-day his virginal daughter is walking the streets of Kabul in tears, unveiled.'

Bacha Saquo listened to the end, waved the mullah away, and tipped his pipe to his lips to catch a last inhalation from the dying embers. His eyelids drooped, his brown cheeks pulled closer to the descending lids.

He reviewed his life of stark activity. Food, a

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weapon and a woman to love, those things had been his without effort. The men around him wanted no more than that. Bacha wanted more, but a few things stood in his way. This business of reading the script scrawled on parchment — he thought about that, but the reading fellows were like hares scampering to cover when they heard life strolling toward them around the bend of the trail. In the hills no man obeyed a fellow whose only authority came from the written page. There were better ways to get things. Only weak people were influenced by words. Weak people seldom possess much worth having. And if, by chance, they fell heir to it, it was easy to get it away from them.

His petty robberies in adolescence had paid well. A sheep or rug or sword had been put quickly at his feet when he pointed his gun.

Like the merchant who expands his business, Bacha Saquo had then gone in for thieving by force on a bigger scale.

He had been caught once, but it was only a few days in a feeble, clay jail before he was free in the mountains again. Then there was a term in the army, fighting around Jalalabad for the newly-crowned Amanullah. Military discipline, even the slight restrictions imposed upon an army of individuals bound together only by their eagerness to fight, did not suit Bacha Saquo. He shot a too officious young officer and went off on his own again.

At a caravanserai east of Kabul, camel drivers crowded round a proclamation pasted on the wall. A

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mullah read out the words, 'A reward of one hundred rupees for the capture of a bandit terrorizing near-by roads'. Bacha Saquo heard it and went to fetch in the bandit.

A few days later Bacha Saquo was prodding the culprit ahead of him, in strict accordance with the specifications of the reward, to the local police. It proved a thankless job. Instead of giving him the justly earned money, the ungrateful authorities took him as well as the prisoner and indicted him for the murder of the officer. Bacha Saquo charged the few days of freedom he lost then to experience, and escaped to his native haunts to a more straightforward business than dealing in promises that meant nothing.

He thought of this as he waited for the caravan.

A few desultory shots from the hillside and a rush of his band of eighty men on to the frightened merchants. A race back to a hidden bandit camp and the division of the spoils.

When the raid was over, the story tellers went to their work. Over cups of tea heavy with sugar, and hookahs of hashish passing around, the brigands listened to tales of Bagdad and Ispahan, stories of humble camel drivers who conquered in love and battle and came to fabulous thrones.

Bacha Saquo did not hear the stories. The painted eyelids, rouged cheeks and flower-decked ears of the decadent dervishes that told the stories were too much for him. Besides, he knew their theme. He had covered part of the trail himself. He needed no yarns of love and battle. His own memory furnished more

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vivid ones. And as far as this coming into fabulous kingdoms was concerned, the son of the water carrier had more definite notions as to how it was done than could be learnt from story tellers.

When men away from women have finished their work, memories come upon them sharpened by desire. These recollections outdo dreams in glamour. Bacha Saquo had a love story of his own better than any dervish's tale.

There was the first love. Nothing had ever been laid at Bacha Saquo's feet that he did not take. This night the recollection of his first love was vivid, for current work was going smoothly, ambition was being held in check and there was no harem in the hills.

There had been other raids when all did not go so well. That was when Bacha Saquo was younger and not so adept in the technique of brigandage. Plans had gone astray. A Khyber chieftain entrusted with the safety of his area had come upon Bacha engaged in one of his robberies, and the young son of the water carrier found himself a prisoner in the village of this chief, high on the sides of Khyber.

Next to the squalid cell in which Bacha Saquo was chained was the garden wall of the chief's home. Cypress trees shot into the sky. The breath of fragrant flowers came occasionally into the jail. In the still night Bacha Saquo could hear a fountain pattering on the other side of the wall. When the moon hung high, the fruit on the trees that drooped above the water seemed like huge opaque jewels taken from the sea and hung in the foliage of a barren land.

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Beauty struggled for expression in the primitive soul of the robber. Liberty was ever ready to assert itself without a struggle. Prisons had been easy for him before, without the temptation of fruit and flowers and moonlight. His blazing black eyes hardened, the decision was made, and the water carrier's son was out of the cell and over the wall.

It was a garden of voluptuous beauty into which he dropped. The flowers and the walks and the water were all arranged to stimulate love. It was the garden of the harem of the Khyber chief.

In the far corner on a bench of stone beneath a drooping tree a woman sat. Her silken veil had dropped from her head and hung on her slender shoulders. Her face in the moonlight was like a head of bronze. The whites of her eyes flashed as she turned toward a rustling in the shrubbery by the wall. The bandit was in the sanctuary of the chief's women; it was the virginal daughter of his captor who sat there.

Others also heard the rustling of shrubbery as Bacha Saquo descended into the garden. He knew that he had been heard, but stopped one moment to look upon the unveiled girl. Then he scaled the wall, to drop on the other side into the arms of the prison guard.

Bonfires were built in the village. Irate priests, angry clansmen and an outraged father gathered in council, while double chains were put upon the romantic bandit.

'His body and his soul must both suffer for this infamy,' was the verdict. Bacha was led from his cell to face the angry tribal council. No punishment could

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be severe enough to satisfy the father of the dishonoured maiden.

Bacha's legs and wrists were bound, as he struggled to keep his balance before the council.

'I will bow to the will and tradition of the tribe,' said Bacha Saquo. 'But I will die for love.'

Said the chief, 'For the honour of my father's name we allow you to deal the penalty yourself.'

The thongs that bound the bandit were cut. The blood rushed to his swollen hands and feet. Despite the pain, he struck an attitude and repeated, 'I will die for love. Name the way I must go.'

It was two in the morning. Candles flickered in clay cups around the council room. Cartridge slings across the chests of warriors glistened in the light. A brother of the outraged girl drew a revolver from the folds of cloth shirred around his waist by a leather strap.

Bacha Saquo seized the gun and placed the muzzle between his eyes.

'Stop,' said the chief. 'I have said that the soul must suffer with the body. You are not to die until the fourth watch begins, when the first rays of the sun strike the blue dome of the minaret. But when the day's light comes to Allah's temple, that moment you must go.'

'To die for the love of one so beautiful is easy,' declared Bacha Saquo. 'But do I know she loves me? I do not. If she does not love me, I die as an infidel. For love, to be complete, must have more than one side.'

The second watch ended, and the third came. The young bandit still stood with the pistol in his hand.

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There was no sympathy in the black eyes that watched him in the grotesque shadows the candles cast.

The stars were shining brightly in the western sky but over the eastern hills there were no more stars. Already there was a pale grey haze. The sun had already brought to life the chattering bazaars of Singapore and Canton. Its long rays were at that moment turning the golden dust of China into myriad tiny diamonds. Only the most stalwart stars now hung in the grey gauze that spread itself across the sky. A tired guard shuffled along the wall. One more round at his post and he could drop to sleep till the heat of the day brought flies and hunger.

Bacha Saquo sat against the wall, a revolver in his hand. He saw one planet still riding the summit of the sky fade out as though weary of watching the tireless movements of humans squirming in darkness over half the world. Bacha Saquo thought of Allah and Allah's heaven. Surely that would be his reward. But the mountaineer still thrilled at the fresh dawn. Death had tried many times before to seduce him. Fresh air and a new day had always been more alluring than a fatalistic acceptance of defeat, though that acceptance was a part of his creed.

Already the sun had struck the Himalayas, and the weary guard's feet were shuffling toward a tumble-down house in the wall. His relief was at attention. In a moment the sun would melt the purple tip of the eastern hill to a white heat and its first rays would throw a shaft of light on the minaret.

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Bacha Saquo watched the minaret come out of the night. Its scaly, cylindrical sides were drab, and the mosaic dome was a dim, futureless promise of brilliance, like a stage full of dim figures waiting for the turn of the switch that would flood them with light.

The gun in his brown fingers took shape in the coming day. The bandit's left eyelid drooped, then opened. 'If I but knew she loved me, I would not die an infidel,' he chanted as he fingered mechanically the mechanism of the pistol. 'If I but knew she loved me.'

The blue dome of the minaret, etched in gold, suddenly sparkled in the white light. The edge of the sun was looking over the brown hill. There was a flurry in the group. The turbaned men stoically watched the bandit cock the pistol. There was a cry. The crowd parted. The black, silky veil of a woman floated through the crowd, a *chuddar* so long that it did not disclose even the tips of her beaded shoes. Her net-covered eyes hidden, she enfolded the bandit in her robe. The gun dropped with a thud on to the earthen floor.

Bacha tried to push the girlish figure aside. It was a dream. He raised the weapon. That was real. But he did not fire it. The figure spoke.

'You do not die an infidel. You do not die, for I love you.'

And so the son of the water carrier won his first wife from death, as he was later to win a kingdom.

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CHAPTER VI

THE day after he had talked with Wali Khan, Bacha Saquo became Habibullah Ghazi, King of Afghanistan. Wali Khan, along with many others of Amanullah's former advisers, shifted their fleet allegiances and joined the bandit king's court. He needed some literate men experienced in statecraft, if for nothing more than appearance's sake.

Before he began his gory reign, he received the diplomatic corps of the foreign countries who maintained legations in Afghanistan.

Bacha Saquo's interpreter on this occasion later told me of that audience.

The great palace hall was crowded with turbulent officials, who, upon the arrival of the foreign guests, behaved as they had been instructed.

Bacha Saquo received the Ministers and their staffs. The foreigners greeted him with a *savoir-faire* that pleased the hillman. They seemed to him genuine and friendly. At the end of the evening, so well did the party go, the bandit king decided on making a speech to let the foreign diplomatists know how high was his esteem for them.

Bacha Saquo spoke a few sentences in rough Peshtu, then paused and instructed the interpreter to translate them into the languages of the guests. The interpreter objected. Bacha insisted.

'Tell them,' Bacha said, 'that they are fine men, that

I prefer them to my own ministers, that I wish my ministers were like them.'

Having unloaded his social obligations, his Majesty sat down to business. Money was his first concern. The city was in ruins, trade paralysed, the state coffers empty. No currency was circulating and Amanullah had drained the wealthy Afghans for taxes in advance.

Bacha Saquo's army had to be paid. First he issued paper money and struggled to make paper money acceptable, but it proved valueless. He struck off some coins of silver and aluminium that circulated fairly well; then he ran out of metal and tried leather, which did not work any better than the paper.

Only one course was open. He fell back upon his old trade — banditry. He had to have cash, and so he simply took it away from any of the citizens who possessed it. His methods were direct. His soldiers entered homes and shops, tortured and killed the owners until their savings were given up. These they seized under the name of taxes. Many stubborn hoarders sacrificed an arm or a foot, a nose or an ear before they would tell where their money lay hidden.

I heard of one instance where a man, after losing both ears, continued to maintain that he had no money. His grandfather was then taken into the courtyard by the soldiers, and all the family were herded around. A cylindrical hole about three feet in diameter and five feet deep was dug. The bandit troopers stood the old man in the hole with only his eyes and nose visible over the top. They then shovelled earth around him, and forced the family to sit by

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while he slowly died, buried alive. The grandson watched his forefather, unable to speak, rolling his old eyes in silent entreaties, but still insisting that he had no money. The soldiers finally left him with his bleeding ears and his dead grandfather.

'If you ever spend a single kabuli of it, your life will pay for your lies,' was their parting admonition.

Bacha Saquo did not allow the shortage of state funds to interfere with his taking the personal loot which he considered his own reward for the trouble he had taken to become king. He guessed that the king business in Afghanistan did not have much of a future. No one can estimate the actual amount of gold, jewels and other treasures which he appropriated, but he admitted that he cached a considerable amount of hoarded Durani wealth which was found in chests that Amanullah did not know existed.

This treasure is now buried at the Sign of the Three Camels. Bacha Saquo is reported to have said, 'No one will ever know where is the Sign of the Three Camels. Four nights I carried three camel loads a night to the cache and there buried it. No one but I knows where it is; for on the fourth night I shot the only man, the officer, who helped me. I shall never tell. He never did.'

While the brigand king was taking his crude means to stabilize his power, Afghanistan was suffering.

The Afghans under Bacha Saquo could wear turbans instead of hats. Women were back in the harem, the schools were closed. The mullahs had high seats in the nation. The grim puritanism of Islam, down to the

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most minor regulations, were fully in effect. The Afghans were back where they thought they wanted to be.

Bacha Saquo gave the most orthodox Mohammedan every opportunity to wallow in his sacred beliefs. But at the same time came disorder, oppression, cruelty, touching each individual. Such doings can hit deeper than infringements on personal conduct. The Afghans under Bacha Saquo felt they were paying too much for the restoration of the traditional way of life.

The bandit king had this reaction of his people with which to contend. And another very human attribute came up — pride. When the fury of righteousness was triumphing, no one stopped to think of other values. But when the proud Afghan suddenly found all his own entrenched ways established again under the hand of an upstart thief, national pride came to the front. It took precedence over their religious morality. Should the Afghan be ruled by an illiterate bandit?

The answer was 'No'.

As the outcry against Amanullah had been for his infidel Western ways, so rebellion against the oppression of the bandit King crystallized on the issue that Afghans could not submit to the rule of a robber.

The tribesmen had used him, in the final analysis, to restore the way of life they preferred while other stronger forces had employed him for their own ends. Bacha Saquo was in a bad spot.

I report the story one hears constantly in Kabul from sources both reputable and otherwise that just as Amanullah was encouraged to take his European

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trip in order to speed him to his downfall, so Bacha Saquo was aided and abetted in his raid upon the capital in order that he might be a convenient stop-gap between Amanullah and a monarch whom the British felt to be in accord with their Asiatic policy.

Great Britain is anathema to the Afghan. Should British foreign policy have taken the position of openly plotting Amanullah's fall and establishing a ruler to their liking, there would have been trouble. The Afghan would have dropped all domestic conflicts to unite against a common foe.

So the yarn goes. Downing Street, with its keen understanding of Orientals, keen at least as an Anglo-Saxon can be about something that is not valued in his own terms, had been at work.

If immediately after Amanullah's debacle a monarch were put on the throne who met British demands, it was feared the tribesmen might suspect a nigger in the wood-pile. A better way, according to the supposed British scheme, was to set up an undesirable situation in the meantime. Into this, a British-approved contender might march, save the nation from its troubles, and arrive on the throne by popular acclaim with the full gratitude of a people freed from terrorization.

Bacha Saquo, so a substantial body of Afghan opinion has it, met the requirements of this plan. He was an ambitious bandit, with qualities of leadership. He had about eighty faithful men under him and the perturbed tribesmen were already joining his ranks when Amanullah sailed for Europe. The only arms he possessed at that time were the rifles which each of

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his band possessed as an individual. With this small organization, he was seen at first as a possible pawn.

The source of Bacha's subsequently plentiful munitions, siege pieces and guns is still a mystery around Kabul. If Wali furnished these guns, no one can tell where the Vakil got them. Nevertheless, the bandit who only a few seasons before had been washing cars in a Peshawar garage, besieged the Afghan capital with 6-inch guns, an abundance of rifles, and ammunition to spare.

Whatever the underlying forces, many bloody days were ahead of the Afghans before Habibullah Ghazi was to become again a mere bandit, the son of the water carrier, and a quarry for righteous huntsmen. That was to be when a respectable monarch took the throne. Nadir Khan was to be this hero, the saviour of his people, a ruthless warrior and devout king. The various accounts of how he eventually came to power, though consistent in their main points, are coloured by the prejudices of the one who happens to tell the story.

I heard it from many angles, from his Majesty Nadir Khan himself, and from his Highness Hashim Khan, who both told parts of the tale. I heard it from their sides and from their enemies, all Afghans. And again from foreign diplomatists who looked upon it as an amusing though a sanguinary episode.

Nadir Khan spoke to me of his coming back from Europe to save his country.

'I was in France, ill,' he said, 'when I first heard of the ruin that Bacha Saquo was working on my country.

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My brothers for many days held the news from me, fearing that hearing it would make my fever higher. At last they agreed that they must tell me, and I set off at once to play what small part I could in freeing my country from the shame and suffering that bad man had brought upon it.'

Another of my informants played a basic part in Nadir Khan's rise to power. He told of its beginning. He was an old Afghan who looked like a benign undertaker in his broadcloth coat. His brilliant intelligence and sympathetic mouth was tempered by a hard, animal cunning that darted from his wide eyes, no matter how frankly they looked upon the world. He had been the physician of Amanullah's father and had remained to serve the young king's mother in that capacity, albeit Amanullah had no use for him.

He had augmented his medical practice by establishing a trading company in Peshawar, which he put in charge of his son. From this he grew wealthy, and abandoned the court when it appeared that Amanullah had come to the end of his tether, to devote all his time to commercial pursuits.

He was engaged in this capacity while accounts of the brigand king's atrocities came seeping abroad. Though he was residing out of the country, the old physician became a hero of Afghan patriotism.

When Nadir Khan and his brothers docked at Bombay, they wired to the velvet-voiced old doctor, and with only their personal luggage boarded a northbound express for his home in Peshawar. From this modest dwelling Nadir Khan was to set out accom-

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panied only by his two kinsmen to win himself a sceptre.

What went on in the simple home of the physician, to my notion, made subsequent events inevitable. It was there that the important decisions were made. Nadir Khan, still convalescent from recurring illness, rested much but was out of his bed during the day for endless conferences. The good doctor afterwards said that Nadir Khan trembled not from weakness but from rage, when he heard how despoiled was his native land.

Enemies of Nadir Khan told me that the leader had trembled not from weakness but from excitement, bred of the realization that the moment for which he had waited two years in France had at last come. That in the doctor's house were gold and requisitions for rifles, and many dispatches from agents who had organized the tribes for a ready recruiting to the banner of their old marshal.

But I must tell the story that the old doctor told me.

'Nadir Khan and Hashim Khan and their brothers came to my house. They cried bitter tears at the sad state of affairs in their country.

'I offered them all my wealth, little as it was, to use if they would but take it. With this money they could secure ammunition and arms. And with these at their disposal, many loyal followers of Nadir Khan among the tribes would gladly follow their brave general in a crusade against the bandit.

'Amanullah was busy recruiting a weak-hearted army to march from Kandahar on to Kabul. The men

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of Kandahar were suspicious of him. They heard him make his pleas at Grigahs. At one of these assemblies Amanullah said that he was the only man to save the nation from the infamy of the bandit. He described the terrors of that water carrier's rule and pleaded: "Men of Kandahar will serve their king?"

'The answer came from an old tribesman. "Go," he said, "go to the infidel whelps that sniffed around you while you followed godless paths, ask them to make you king once more. Come not to us and beg us to spill our blood for the devil."

'So Amanullah was faring poorly in the south when Nadir Khan came to my home. He had only just arrived when an emissary from Amanullah came from Kandahar entreating the marshal to come to his aid.

'I well remember the night that Nadir Khan heard this petition. Nadir Khan is a kind man and loves his country. He said that anything to save it from the blood-spilling Bacha Saquo he would do, even to putting back on the throne that fool Amanullah.

'I was astonished when the general said he would go to Amanullah. And I was thrilled when Hashim Khan spoke. Hashim Khan respects and loves his brother. He is not a man quick to anger, but when he heard Nadir Khan ready to ally himself with Amanullah to save his country from the bandit, Hashim Khan uttered harsh words.

' "No," he cried, "do not be a fool. Amanullah has done our country and yourself nothing but evil. You will lose the respect of the warriors who love you if

you show that you can tolerate the sins of Amanullah. Do not go to him, I say."

'Said Hashim Khan, "If you my brother do not use your influence with the tribes of the south and east and yourself capture Kabul, a Mohammedan nation will be washed off the face of the globe. And you will have to answer to your God for that failure."

'Nadir Khan, who was very white from illness, turned whiter at hearing his brother so talk to him.

'But so great was the conviction and feeling in the voice of Hashim Khan that Nadir Khan forgave him for his disrespect and said, "Give me five minutes alone and I shall make my decision."

'Nadir Khan retired.

'We sat in the room and supped tea. Hashim Khan's eyes still blazed. He did not know what his brother's decision would be, because Nadir Khan has a will of his own.

'Five minutes seemed like many hours. When a moment before that time elapsed, Nadir Khan joined us, tired and smiling a paternal understanding. "You may tell the courier of Amanullah that I will not join him." '

So did Nadir Khan set out with his brothers into the golden mountains of Hindu Kush, and sound a battle-cry summoning loyal tribesmen to their cause. They fought eight months before they came upon the capital and forced it near capitulation.

The military power of Bacha Saquo at the end of that time was exhausted. He had but one last resource that might save his citadel. The sixty relatives of Nadir

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Khan were still in the palace dungeon. Near by was the arsenal, stacked with all the explosives the bandit king possessed.

Bacha Saquo sent word to Nadir Khan, 'If you fire upon the palace, it will mean almost certain death to your family.'

The brothers held a conference. His Majesty related to me their discussion.

'I argued this way,' he said. 'We have shed blood and risked our lives for our nation. Many men have died to bring us this far. The nation stands ahead of any individuals, no matter whose kin they be. In order to save the country, I say the fortress must be stormed.'

It was stormed.

Two days later Nadir Khan, at the head of an army of two thousand men, rode triumphant into the weary city to hear the cries of the people begging him to be their king.

Bacha Saquo fled into the hills, back to his native village.

His ignominious flight was touched with heroism. It was not the reasoned escape of the soft Amanullah. A brave man at bay, Bacha did not flee through the secret hole in the palace wall until the enemy troops entered the main gate. When he did run, it was not to an alien sanctuary. He took off for home. His arrival in his native village must have been a triumph more humanly gratifying than his ascent to the throne.

The bazaar-keepers and holy men and the herdsmen who had known him in boyhood looked upon him

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now with an amazed admiration he had never received from diplomats and intriguing courtiers.

He passed the vineyard of a neighbour who had, when Bacha Saquo was a child, uttered disrespectful words about the old water carrier. Bacha Saquo, even at twelve years of age, showed his mettle. He gathered a good-sized gang of boys, waited until dark and led them into the vineyard. They tore down the vines, wrecked the trellises and pulled up all the plants that yielded to their growing strength.

Now grapes were again cradled in deep green leaves with the first touch of highland autumn.

Bacha Saquo had seldom visited his village. Once before he had come empty-handed, and they laughed at the wayfarer who had gone away boasting of conquests that were to be his, only to return a bandit. He had stayed but a short time and was once more on his way. But into the village since had come word of his triumph.

Now with autumn, the bad boy who had been king came back home. Villagers forgot the wild tricks he had played, remembered only that here was one of them who had ventured out and made a bold try for what all of them wanted but lacked the nerve to attempt. They welcomed home the traveller.

Nadir Khan's troops followed Bacha Saquo to his stronghold. Nadir Khan's strength was supreme. He could have stormed and captured the village. Of course, the hunted man might have escaped alone and left the troopers to take vengeance on the innocent hillmen who had sheltered him.

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But Nadir Khan made Bacha Saquo a proposal very similar to the one which Bacha had submitted to him, when his loved ones were in the besieged castle at Kabul. Then Nadir Khan had ignored the safety of his family on patriotic grounds. He was willing to jeopardize them that Afghanistan might be saved and himself, incidentally, made king. But Bacha's mood was different.

'Come out and give yourself up,' the king's message read. 'If you do, I promise you immunity. If you do not, your village will be burned and every man, woman and child annihilated.'

The bandit heard the message, leaped into his saddle and rode into the enemies' camp. His neighbours had given him sanctuary, had been loyal to the turbulent boy who had been born among them. He spared them a too costly penalty for their loyalty.

Nadir Khan firing on his own family, and Bacha Saquo surrendering to save his tribe were at opposite poles of a world. For Nadir Khan, the power and the glory was ahead. Bacha Saquo's arms were lashed behind him. He sat on his horse as if he were a part of it as he rode a captive back to Kabul. He said, 'Do what you will with me, I'm content. My father threw water on the streets that dust might not blow in the faces of rich merchants. I roamed the hills to take what I could get, and I got what few men on this earth have had. 'I was a king, and a king is next to God.'

Bacha Saquo was shot and hanged. Afghans believed, as Bacha Saquo did, that bullets passed through

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him harmlessly, because he carried on his right arm a charm a mullah had given him, when he predicted that Bacha Saquo would be king. Two months before that time, the mullah had died. Bacha Saquo was sure the charm died with him, but the natives were conservative. They made his death doubly sure.

I asked his Majesty Nadir Khan how it came about that he promised Bacha Saquo immunity and yet he was executed.

Nadir Khan replied thoughtfully, 'Bacha Saquo was a dog, but I had nothing to do with his death. I could not restrain my people. They demanded his life.'

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CHAPTER VII

At three o'clock I was to hear his Majesty Nadir Khan talk to me of Amanullah, Bacha Saquo and Nadir Khan. There was some formality before my interview. The routine began early.

At ten o'clock in the morning the Foreign Minister's motor car called for me and I rode away dressed in cutaway coat, striped trousers, spats and patent leather shoes, with an extra three high starched collars tucked in the door pocket of the automobile, and the temperature 110° in the shade.

At ten I was due at a session of the first representative Afghan Parliament. It was a dummy congress, despite its outwardly democratic method of selection.

The provinces were divided into districts, each of which was entitled to a representative elected by popular vote. Suffrage qualifications were high. They included property and literacy tests. Since only from one to two per cent of the Afghans can read and write and a large percentage of those are students without wealth, the electorate does not constitute an overwhelming portion of the population. There is no party system, and I understand that the court must finally approve of all candidates.

However, it is an assemblage that has the nation's peace in hand. To it are elected many tribal chieftains who are called upon to spend a year in the capital,

fiddling with law-making; and, thus occupied, are kept out of mischief.

They bring with them less literate chieftains who remain in the city on a subsidy, lounging about in exceptionally clean turbans and capes, while their urbane leisure makes the movement of merchandise over caravan routes distinctly less hazardous.

Parliament met in a large hall of one of the palace buildings. The room would satisfy the most critical connoisseur of parliamentary halls. There was no lack of crystal candelabras, velvet hangings and rich, silent carpets. In addition to these, it was adorned by a dais that should for ever remain to haunt envious legislators who desire intricate rostrums.

It might have been teakwood, for all I know; but it looked like bird's-eye maple bedroom-sets cut up and made into a labyrinth of stairways and pulpits, above which rose a Speaker's chair.

The Foreign Minister led me this hot August morning into the king's box — a section at the side of the room marked off by satin-covered ropes.

The Members of Parliament were as decorous an assemblage as ever gathered at a synod of prelates.

Every member wore the same dress: black laced shoes, black broadcloth trousers, a long, box coat that fastened close around the neck, the whole topped by a black fez. They sat in regulation lecture-room chairs.

Here for two and a half hours representatives from each district clambered over their neighbours, found their way up one of the stairways to the rostrum and made a speech. Each speech was translated. There

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was a familiar cadence and inflection in the foreign tongue; for orators are like the poor: the same the whole world over.

My audience with his Majesty Nadir Khan was at three o'clock. The Foreign Minister, Faiz Khan, accompanied me. We drove through the palace grounds, a walled enclosure perhaps half a mile square, its velvety lawns and gardens sprinkled with palaces and cut up by hedged roads of snowy gravel.

I looked out at the clock tower, the chief symbol of Westernization in Afghanistan. One face of the tall obelisk showed three-fifteen. We are late, I thought. The hands on the next side read six-thirty. I did not know whether to be alarmed at being tardy or to indulge in some sombre reflection befitting the stiff, formal occasion and say, 'Ah, time has stopped in Afghanistan.'

We drew up to a walk leading to the main palace. It was lined with soldiers. I took my cigarette case from my pocket and left it in the car. I was afraid that from habit I would attempt to smoke at some ill-chosen regal moment.

We entered the wide doorway into a rotunda that was like the rotunda of any palace — tall onyx columns, vast marble stairway, all heavily ornamented.

Soldiers stood on the landing, and officers were stalking the carpeted balcony which opened off the palace rooms.

'You will stand here, please,' said Faiz Khan, as he left me across the corridor and entered a high carved doorway. Probably five minutes later an officer came

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to conduct me to the same doorway through which the Minister had disappeared. There I waited for perhaps another ten minutes before it swung open and Faiz Khan emerged to announce, 'His Majesty will see you.'

I entered the room, a huge lofty-ceilinged chamber heaped with rugs and hung with paintings. Long french windows draped with maroon velvet made up one entire wall. In the far corner sat a pale man, with trimly cut black beard, streaked with grey. His large, melancholy black eyes looked through bone-rimmed spectacles. His heavy lips drooped.

I followed directions, stopped as I entered the room and bowed, walked to the desk and bowed again. The frail king rose from his chair, smiled, extended his hand.

'I'm glad to welcome you to Afghanistan. I think you will find that chair very comfortable. I like to sit in it myself,' he said, pointing to a deep green club chair at his side.

His Majesty wore a coarsely woven grey tweed suit, a shirt, collar and necktie of lavender. He spoke excellent English. At times he hesitated for the precise word; but when it came, it was correct. His voice was soft and firm, though after an extended speech the ravages of tuberculosis manifested themselves and it became weak; he showed difficulty in breathing. He was more like a popular, understanding college professor than a field-marshal who had led his genuinely warlike people to victory. And he appeared in no way fitted for the rough-and-tumble intrigue of a Machiavellian court.

'Have you enjoyed our Independence Celebration? You also have an Independence Day?' he asked.

I recalled an incident that had occurred before his marquee during a review the day before. Sandbags had been thrown up a few feet ahead of the king's tent. Afghan marksmen were trying their skill with rifles and machine guns, aiming at targets placed across the lake for rifle fire, and on a distant mountainside for machine guns. Afghan troopers had been demolishing bull's-eyes with monotonous regularity, before the finals came on.

Then a trooper approached and saluted the king. He was as nearly spherical as a human could be. His cheeks were like apples, his beard was cut in a circle and his Falstaffian paunch hung almost to his knees. He could not have been more than five feet tall. He tried to lie down on his belly to shoot in regulation form, but his belly was not seaworthy. He listed first to one side, then to the other, rolled over on his back with a helpless look, and spoke to an officer. The embarrassed lieutenant repeated to the Minister of War the marksman's request that he be allowed to employ his own position for shooting. The king's party was amused, and the request was granted. The soldier sat down, his stubby legs out, his paunch almost touching his toes, and began to fire, shattering target after target. After the match was over he waddled in to receive a sack of silver, the first prize.

When I recalled it to his Majesty, he said, 'You cannot tell by the shape of an Afghan how he will shoot.'

Then he questioned me on the topic I found most universally pleasant for foreign nations — the depression in America.

'Depressions are not so bad for us,' he said. 'We are not accustomed to two cars in every garage. But we have suffered more than a depression. The revolution has made us a poor nation. Much of the hardship you have probably had travelling in our country was due to the last months of Amanullah's extravagance and the crimes of Bacha Saquo.'

I wanted to hear his Majesty tell how a king is made. I began to question him.

'Did your Majesty, upon returning from France, hope to become king?' I queried.

'I did not,' he said sharply, displaying a flicker of the force that still dwelt in his sick body. 'I refused to consider taking the crown. And that although tribesmen in the south-east told me that I must make an open declaration or they would not support me in my attack upon Bacha Saquo. I refused their support on those terms.'

He continued, relating to me the story of his rise to power, which I have already told.

The conversation was interesting and lively. I forgot that I was talking to a king and reached repeatedly into my vest pocket for my cigarette case. Each time I was thankful I had left it in the car.

His Majesty was explaining the fallacies of Amanullah's programme and the efficacy of his own.

'You cannot build a nation,' he said, 'any more than you can build a house by starting at the top.

Amanullah tried to change the minds of people by changing their hats. He failed. I am working from the foundation. The painstaking, difficult tasks involved in preparing the ground take as much time as sending the structure into the sky. Such work at first does not make a big display.'

'Would you consider,' I argued, 'disarming your subjects a superficial reform of Amanullah's type?'

'Let me explain,' he replied. 'We both know that any nation where half the citizens are armed is not an ideal state. But collecting rifles from my people now would be an error, despite the fact that all arms belong to the army.

'For generations my people have been accustomed to protect themselves. It was necessary because the central government was not strong enough to care for them. It is my plan to so police the country that private arms will be unnecessary. The moment they are not needed, they will become a burden. A gun is heavy to carry. It costs money. Sacrifices are made to obtain one. If the necessity for its use is eliminated, the rifle will vanish. So it is my policy not arbitrarily to make superficial rules, but to create conditions in which such rules will not be called for.'

'Do you,' I asked, 'include the closing of schools as a part of such a programme?'

His Majesty's temper was rising.

I reached to the pocket where I keep my cigarettes. He was just ready to reply, but spoke to an attendant in the far corner of the room. The man brought a golden box and set it before me on the desk. His

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Majesty opened the lid and pushed the casket toward me. It was filled with English cigarettes, both Virginia and Turkish.

'I do not smoke. Smoke if you wish,' said the King. I did.

His Majesty dropped some of his formality. 'Many schools are closed because the treasury is without funds. Everything has been spent and destroyed in civil war.'

'Have the mullahs no hand in the delayed re-opening of the schools?'

'We are not going to offend the priests by undertaking universal education of both boys and girls until such time as the nation seems ready for it.'

I thought of what Sher Ahmad Khan, his Majesty's ambassador and brother-in-law, had said to me in Persia: 'Amanullah cut off the beards of the mullahs; Nadir Khan put his beard in their hands.'

Then his Majesty steered the conversation to foreign impressions of his reign. He wanted to learn what was the public opinion in countries that do not recognize Afghanistan, and was particularly interested in the United States.

'We prefer to have our resources exploited by capital from countries which have no colonial ambitions in the East,' he explained. 'Our country is rich in oil, coal, copper and other precious and commercial minerals. But we do not see fit to sell Afghanistan piecemeal by concessions to European powers who have aggressive interests.

'In your opinion,' he asked, 'are there any reasons

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why the United States should not send a legation to Kabul?'

I could think of but a single important one: namely, that there is not enough business there to warrant the expense. It might be done as a measure of goodwill, but times are too hard to indulge in fancy gestures.

Then I named what appeared to me to be other contentions against American recognition: The court system is ecclesiastic and governed by uncodified religious custom interpreted and adjudicated by priests; the lack of stability in the central government; the power of the tribes; and the deeply rooted feeling against foreigners on the part of the great mass of people.

Each one of the points his Majesty discussed at length. He said that although the courts would remain purely Islamic tribunals for domestic litigation, there would be a system of jurisprudence, not unlike continental law, set up for foreigners, untouched by Moslem regulations.

'Of course,' he added, 'our Supreme Court would be a final appeal.'

My nod lacked conviction.

I thought of the Chief Justice of the Afghan Court, whose word would be law. I had seen him with the king at an official function. He was a man of enormous frame who looked stubby despite his great height and seemed to be built of blocks of meat. His head, a huge cube; his black beard, cut square, dropped down over the white cape he wore; his turban above it

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white and so carefully wound it looked as if poured in a mould; his nose and forehead of gargantuan proportions. Yet his eyes, large and smouldering beneath the thicket of his brows, dominated the whole countenance with their cruel, tragic lustre.

The prophets of old, who scourged the wicked and warred for righteousness, would have envied such demeanour. King and Cabinet faded into the background before this epic-like hero of Islamic faith. I had watched him, spellbound, and speculated on what words of doom had been formed by his thick, hard lips. Appearances, misleading devils, had me baffled.

'The Chief Justice is liberal in his interpretation of the law,' his Majesty told me.

And so we conversed. His Majesty had real interest in his contentions; while I, paying homage to royalty, held my breath only a fraction of a moment longer than usual, awaiting an opportunity to break into the argument.

I had forgotten some of the instructions regarding etiquette for taking leave of a king, which I had received from the Foreign Office. But a rule I did remember was that a commoner cannot depart on his own power. He must wait for dismissal.

This came after a two-hour chat.

'It has been an interesting afternoon,' said his Majesty. 'You may rise.'

I obeyed. We shook hands. Then I remembered I was to bow again. This I did, glanced over my shoulder to see that the fifty feet of carpet between me and the door was unruffled and that no one had set a

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chair in my way. I backed this distance with the feeling of a tight-rope walker who doesn't have much confidence in his act and is surprised that it is going over all right.

When I reached the threshold I stopped, bowed, paused, bowed again and backed out. The door closed silently.

My supply of collars had just held out — my last had wilted.

I got back into the car. My cigarette case, still filled, awaited me.

As we wheeled out of the palace grounds, the lawn was sprinkled with courtiers, bobbing up and down in the calisthenics of Moslem prayer.

The king business, at close range, astonished me. I should have liked not to have been impressed, to have rationalized his Majesty as a petty monarch of a petty country who came into power through intrigue and bloodshed. But it is difficult for one not bred in sophisticated centres to forget the fantasies of youth — the days when history's pages danced with glamorous, brave, wicked, sentimental, greedy kings and queens who lived in marble halls, talked in epigrams and sent their soldiers on to battlefields, drums rolling, banners flying. Faiz Khan interrupted my romanticizing of royalty.

'King Amanullah,' he said, 'was a fool. He did everything backwards. He had no education beyond a short term in a local military school. He didn't know anything about the world until his last trip. He started things he could not finish. He did not

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know his people. And he did a hell of a lot of harm.'

Royalty was already being humanized for me before the fragrance of a palace garden had faded away.

'Nadir Khan has a sound policy. He has borrowed thousands of pounds without interest from the British government. It will pay his army until he can get more taxes. He will keep his head.'

'How would you like to be king?' I asked the prince.

He laughed, waved his hand as if he were brushing away a comic, annoying insect. 'Not for the world,' he said.

The following day I was on my way out of Kabul. The next time I heard of Nadir Khan was in Kansas City, Missouri. I was looking through newspapers for clippings on a farm strike. On the third page was a small item — 'King Stabbed.' The date line was Kabul. I read on. 'Nadir Khan died to-night from stab wounds inflicted by an assassin as the king was leaving his harem.'

But royalty in his case did not get even an accurate obituary. A few weeks later I was handed the illustrated supplement of an English newspaper. In it was a photograph of Nadir Khan dying in the arms of an officer. Behind him were the staring faces of men I had known in his Cabinet. The king's right hand was half clenched, moving toward his wound. The caption said, 'Unusual photograph of the King of Afghanistan as he was shot on the parade ground by a young student'.

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Afghanistan came back to me in a whirl, and I recalled as I looked at the picture the night in Kabul when a youngster said to me: 'We want to read and write; we want our women like other women of the world. Nadir Khan can't stop us; if he does, someone will kill him.'

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CHAPTER VIII

I HAD obtained my story. The British Legation sent me a note by bearer. 'Your passport has been *viséd*. If you do not care to trust the valuable document to a courier, you may have it by calling at the Legation.'

The note was like a breath of cool air in the August heat. I had spent ten days longer in Kabul than I anticipated because the office of his Britannic Majesty's Legation did not *visé* my passport when first I submitted it to them. It seemed incongruous to me, their excuse, in the light of the fact that the British Minister to Kabul is reputed by local gossip to be one of Britain's most astute students of Eastern affairs, and that his power in Afghanistan may not be second even to Nadir Khan's. I had been told nevertheless by the counsellor of the Legation that the Minister did not have authority to issue a *visa* without the approval of the North-west Frontier Officer at Simla.

There was telegraph communication between Kabul and Simla, and I offered to prepay any wires of inquiry they wished to dispatch. I could have walked to Simla and secured the O.K. in less time than they took to get it. I was in a dilemma. I could think only two things — either his Britannic Majesty's Minister had some very peculiar restrictions placed upon him that precluded the Foreign Office's accepting his judgment upon the granting of visas; or that North-west India

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was in such a disturbed state that the Military Intelligence at Simla had to pass on a casual traveller as though he were a potential threat against the foundations of a mighty empire. No one but the Russians, over the many borders I have crossed, ever went in for such hocus-pocus.

I enjoyed, however, the mysterious delay. It is fun to be suspected of insidious motives by those who should know them when they meet them.

With the passport once more in my pocket, I set out to get a car to carry me to Peshawar. Several motors were ready to return. I looked over three of them. All of them showed more of a flair for decoration than mechanics — one was painted with morning glories, the other two adorned by more prosaic roses. None of them had brakes or good tyres. I chose the best and took it for a drive. It was in as bad shape mechanically as the touring car I had had submitted to me in Kandahar. I decided to wait until a more desirable one came to town.

Then, like manna from heaven, a German drove into Kabul in a brand new Plymouth Sedan, having come to try to collect some overdue bills the Afghans owed his firm for work on the palace. He reported two hold-ups on the road that day and was enthusiastic about his motor car. He credited his safe arrival to its speed. He said he had paid a thousand rupees for the ride.

I set out post haste to canvass garages and caravanserais to find the driver. I thought what I had been told about the car too good to be true. I knew, too, that anything the driver collected on the return trip

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would not go to his employer. It would be baksheesh for him.

I found him fretting because he had to return at once and so he asked only one hundred rupees. I offered him ten. We settled on forty-five, which my Hindu adviser claimed was fifteen too much.

Leaving-time from Kabul had to be carefully calculated, since arrival at Khyber Pass should be before four p.m., as the fortified road through the mountains closed daily at that hour. We determined upon two-thirty a.m. for departure. I prepared to celebrate. I had been gone many months and was actually leaving for home.

I had tried a bit of everything but hashish. My bearer smoked it regularly, pulling in the vapour of his waterpipe, exhaling it, smacking his lips and saying, 'Afghan whisky, Afghan whisky'.

I bought a chillum — a green, glazed one with a beaded stem — and sent my boy for hashish. (The natives call it *charas*.) I gave him two afghanis (twopence) and he brought back four cornucopias, each containing about an ounce of brown powder. He brought in a charcoal brazier containing glowing camel dung, and sat down to prepare the narcotic.

He put a heap of powder into his hand, smoothed it off, pressed a small crater in it with his thumb, poured on a few drops of water, mixed it into a smooth, putty-like mass. He laid this on the fire for a moment, snatched it up and kneaded it, put it back, and continued this until he had a heavy dough. Then he prepared the pipe, filled it half way with water, and

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into the bowl of it dropped a piece of clay. This sufficed to hold the ingredients and still let air through its jagged edges. Over the clay he poured strong tobacco, then added a layer of the hashish mass, then a little more tobacco, another layer of hashish, and a layer of tobacco.

With a pair of tongs he dropped on to this a piece of smouldering camel dung and set to puffing violently at the pipe. First came the rancid smoke of tobacco, than a sweet, heavy odour like incense. With the first breath of this, he handed me the pipe. I inhaled once. It almost tore the membrane from my windpipe. I coughed and set it aside.

'No good, no good,' said my boy.

I inhaled several lungfulls of it. Its clear, unsatisfying effect was immediate. It was like nothing I had imagined. There was none of the exhilaration of alcohol. Certainly it did not befuddle me to the extent that I could not go to my typewriter and jot down some notes.

Puffs came under my eyes; they felt stary and strained. My kidneys worked overtime throwing off the toxin. I seemed confused only as to the sense of time and space. I had read that elephants walked through keyholes and donkeys galloped over the ceiling, but beheld no such zoological phenomena. Though probably only a few minutes passed in typing a few hundred words of notes, it seemed to me as if I had sat down at the typewriter long ago in my childhood. Walking across the room was an interminable lightfooted journey. I tried to worry about prepara-

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tions for my departure, but failed; leaving or staying became items for abstract metaphysical consideration.

The gramophone music sounded far away and eternal. Each note seemed like sound stretched out to a long, thin sheet, a measure was a symphony. I wrote down that were I doomed to the existence of the Afghan I should spend my last two afghanis for such Jovian indifference to reality and such an exaggerated bargain in distance and sound.

Then I wrote that being suspended in space was not half so much fun as being on one's feet, and wondering what is around the corner, possibly a stately doorway in a clay wall, a pretty girl walking with sure, graceful steps to meet her lover. A chance to make some money. To turn a trick that gives you the feeling you're a first class fellow in your line of business. Or to feel decisively that you have been beaten, but that it wasn't a bad show, and to be able to laugh because you had felt yourself so impregnable up to the moment you stubbed your toe. Finally all such reactions vanished in the smoke.

I fell asleep fully dressed. Though I left orders to be called, the words sounded to me like the echo of chants in a far-away cathedral mumbled by some priestly *alter ego* who tended my wants. It was early in the evening when I floated to my bed and vanished into unconsciousness as if I had been bedded on a cloud.

I woke at one o'clock. Thick candles were still burning in my room. Except for a dull headache, the effect of the drug was gone. Only its aroma hung in the

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room, like a perfumed disinfectant. I called my boy. He did not answer, I went into the corridor to find him sleeping on the floor, unresponsive to any shoves I gave him with my foot.

'Sahib, Sahib,' I heard from the ground below my window. It was the Sikh driver. He had brought his car there the night before, slept in it and was awake and ready to go.

I had my pass which would let me by the sentries in Kabul's streets and the hills beyond.

My luggage was ready. The Sikh and I carried it out without waking the servants. I went back to my room to make a final check that I had left nothing behind.

When I came down the stairs, the halls were crowded with sleepy servants. I had tipped them all the night before, but someone had heard me moving around and all of them were out to say farewell — all but my bearer, who still slept on the floor dreaming, probably, of his own departure for a foreign land, with thousands of attendants seeing him off in style.

The night was starlit and without a moon as we drove through the mud-barricaded streets. Every few hundred yards a sentry challenged. We stopped, gave the password, showed the pass if necessary and went on.

Leaving Kabul comfortably in a silent motor car while the city slept, gave me a quite different last impression of it than if I had wiggled my way out through a crowded bazaar by day.

The futility of the ruins, the bloodshed, the schemes of men asleep in the palace. Women behind the blank

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walls, sleeping after their lord and master had left the harem. Mothers nursing whimpering babies. Beggars picking up sticks for the morning fire, last shadows in the night. Then the gate of the city blank and quiet, unaware of the kings and rogues that tramp through it intent on their particular missions. Farther up in the hills the town below me, dead, geometrical shapes.

The field of drama that had used for its climaxes many lives and at least one dynasty, and the hopes and fears of all the people who were resting below, was now being drawn away in the darkness to the store-house of memory like so much scenery from a play that had its few nights of light and attention.

By dawn I was high in the mountains on the main trail leading to the outside world. Parts of it were in fair shape, and the motor pulled smoothly uphill. Again there were many narrow sections and hazardous turns, deliberately kept that way so that no aggressive nation can bring in large guns. Even Amanullah would not mar this defence in order to bring in machinery. In a Peshawar storehouse there still lies some equipment for Afghan textile mills bought and paid for by Amanullah.

I carried jugs of boiled water but was always on the look out for a fresh drink at a spring. I saw a small waterfall, dropping twenty feet over a ledge, at its base some green reeds. Above it the creek wound over the hill through a line of vegetation. I went to drink from it but its pure sparkle did not overcome my long-standing suspicion of loose Asiatic waters.

I climbed up the embankment, followed the stream

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away back to see how pure it looked. I trailed it around a bend in the hill to an abominable source — a stagnant pool of water. Around its edges was a tribal camp of skin huts. Camels, donkeys and women washing clothes were all in the water. My investigation had been worth while and the boiled water tasted better.

The roads became worse as we neared Jalalabad. We cracked a few leaves in the springs of the new car. My early start from Kabul put us in Jalalabad by three in the afternoon. I spent the greater part of the hot night wandering about the city, which had little interest for me. It was in ruins. The meanest mud hut had not been too inconsequential a target for revolutionary guns, while palaces and government buildings had been shelled and burned beyond repair.

The following morning we took off for the next stage of the journey. It was well we left early.

Subsidies had not been paid to the tribes along the way since spring, and banditry was rife. There had been three forays upon motor and camel caravans within the prior forty-eight hours.

We were making fair speed along a smooth road when the last of the front springs broke. It was late afternoon. The sun was hanging on a western mountain peak.

To the left of the car was the cliff. To the right, a steep incline swept one hundred feet into a deep gully. For several hours we had passed no life. Since the roads close at nightfall, travellers seek safety at villages or caravanserais before four o'clock.

In Afghanistan, the remedy for a broken spring is a

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log of wood tied under the radiator and on to the axle. Below us stretched the rocky valley, and around us were heaped stony mountains. My driver, a Sikh, was voluminous in his explanations of the causes of our trouble and very quiet as to offering an immediate remedy. We had to have a log of wood. Leaving the car alone while both of us made a search for a log might well mean the loss of our car and its luggage. To stay with it on the road after nightfall, we stood an equal chance of disappearing along with the car and the luggage.

The Sikh fired the samovar, thinking a cup of tea would help us.

No pebbles tumbled down the mountainside. No calls came. The air was as silent as we were bewildered when two turbanned heads and the blue barrels of two rifles suddenly appeared over the edge of the embankment, as if floating without bodies to sustain them. Two sets of white teeth glistened in the cavernous depths of two black beards. I motioned to them to come up. They came up chattering and grinning, stuck their heads into the car, pushed around in the luggage. The Sikh talked to them and the replies came in short, abrupt words.

'Does Sahib have cigarettes for the Afghan?' inquired my driver.

I had.

They all went to the front of the car and inspected the damage. One of the Afghans came to me where I sat at the front seat and talked to me earnestly with sweeping gestures. I gathered that he could help.

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'Tell them,' I said to my driver, 'we will pay them what they want if they will get us a log.'

He conveyed the information. They shrugged their shoulders, laughed, tossed their turbanned heads, and began to gesture emphatically.

'They say,' explained the Sikh, 'that they must go to the village to get a log. But one of them will stay here and guard us, and the other one will go because the sun will go down before he can return.'

In a moment he was out of sight down the *coulée*. I saw him again on the far side of the opposite mountain.

We had more tea and more cigarettes. I slept a while. I awoke to have another cup of tea. The stars were bright. The moon along the mountain range threw a glimmer of white light ahead of it. As silently as he had come the first time the Afghan reappeared, not with one log, but with a great armload of them. We tied them into place. The Afghans laughed and chattered. I asked one to show me his gun. He smiled, shook his head as one might to a child who had demanded things that belong to adults.

When we were ready to go, I took a handful of coins, each worth about two cents — I probably grabbed a dollar's worth. Handing them to the Sikh, I said, 'Ask the men if this is enough'.

They shook their heads, laughed and talked to me.

'What do they say?' I asked the Sikh.

'They say they are honoured to help an American. That the Afghan greets the American and thanks him for coming.'

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Amanullah, characterizing his people, said, 'My people are savages, but I will tame them.'

The greater part of the next day we spent at a customs station on a river bank. Several thousand people were camped by the muddy stream in flapping tents of hide, mere crude sunshades draped over wobbly sticks. Camels by the hundreds in circles, and heaps of bales and baskets; innumerable charcoal fires and a score of motor trucks. Pathans, Afridis, Hindus, and Sikhs squirming, squatting, and sleeping prone all over the earth. It was a shabby, wild bivouac of grey and brown. Sheer above it the mountains rose, sealing the valley with great, towering walls of stone. When we started a climb of a few hundred feet up the steep bank, soldiers came running to order us back.

Corrections were made on our permit for the car, and we took off again, steering straight for the mountain barrier. The road appeared to end abruptly at the mighty barricade, but a mile on, like a crack in the encircling rock, was a narrow opening.

Into this slender breach we headed, steep cliffs on both sides. Here was more intimacy with mankind's dim past than can be had from any crumbling ramparts. To this gap like an opening in an hour-glass the Aryan nations had flooded from the northern plains of mid-Asia, filed through it, to spread into India's vast expanses. The legions of Alexander the Great that had twisted through the defile were modern travellers compared to the ancient hosts that had passed through that narrow gorge before them.

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ARMOURED CARS ACCOMPANY THE CARAVANS ON THE ROAD TO THE KHYBER PASS

1961

We slipped through quickly into a rolling valley with more mountains on its opposite side, and sped over a bumpy road as fast as our now springless car could take us.

In the range ahead was Khyber Pass—a glistening black road looping and looping up a precipitous cliff. We had to reach it within an hour. Howitzers on concrete bases were planted unseen in its sides. A military railway was tunnelled through it. Regiments were in cantonments in its ravines. The smooth, oily hardness of a factory etched the old way to the East.

We still had time to get through. Beyond the Pass, forty miles of hard, wide road. Then Peshawar — the old city stinking of the Orient; the chaste, new city housing British military men. A railway. A night's ride to Agra. The Taj Mahal — all of Islam's beauty concentrated in alabaster. Jungles. Bombay hotels, edible food. A band playing on a liner bound for Suez and the West.

All this lay ahead.

The road through the wavy valley-bottom was sometimes in clear view, sometimes disappearing around bends. A half-mile on we turned a curve and pulled up a straight stretch. There, away down the highway, was a familiar object, one I had not seen for many moons — a wayside signboard. The trestle back of it was toward us.

We rode by it, and I looked back to read: 'It is Positively Forbidden to Enter Afghan Territory'.

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